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Community Leadership: A New Academic Major

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Abstract

Complexity and rapid change prompt the need for institutions of higher education to reexamine curricula and programs to ensure they are preparing graduates for 21st century career opportunities. At Ohio State University, conversion from quarters to semesters provided the impetus to revisit the undergraduate curriculum and create a new Community Leadership major. The new major was designed to prepare students for future Extension outreach and other leader roles to influence positive change in communities through learning partnerships. Development of the undergraduate major and its implications for Extension and leadership workforce preparation are described.

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Increasing complexity and the accelerating pace of change are creating challenges for the U.S. higher education system seeking to address societal needs and the expectations of graduates. Land-grant universities have historically sought to provide practical and relevant academic programs designed to prepare tomorrow's workforce. According to Bonnen (1998), the land-grant tradition introduced "service to society" as a philosophical foundation in U.S. higher education; and due to the changing context, the outreach mission of the land-grant university system has continued to evolve. At The Ohio State University, a new Community Leadership undergraduate major was developed to prepare graduates for work in the Extension system and other community leader and educator roles. Development of the new major was guided by current research on important competencies for Extension professionals (Cooper & Graham, 2001; Harder, Place, & Scheer, 2010; Scheer, Cochran, Harder, & Place, 2011; Stone & Coppernoll, 2004) as well as concerns raised by administrators in our state and research in Florida (Brodeur, Higgins, Galindo-Gonzalez, Craig, & Haile, 2011) about new employees lacking critical skills and competencies for success.

The conversion from a quarter to semester system at The Ohio State University from 2010- 2012 provided the impetus for examining existing majors and curricula in the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership (ACEL). Rather than making minor changes in the

transition, there was an opportunity to reinvent academic programs. Each academic major and program was examined and refined to best serve students and meet the changing context and needs of our communities.

This article shares how the new Community Leadership major was developed to prepare students for future roles in community leadership and outreach education.

Why Community Leadership?

Leadership is a dynamic process that accommodates the complexity of relationships occurring among people from potentially diverse backgrounds whose behaviors, thoughts, or actions may be influenced by the leadership process. Recent research suggests that leaders who understand themselves as well as others have a more positive impact on their followers during periods of transformational change (Roy & Ken, 2011). Interpersonal and group relations are recognized as key elements that affect the direction and rate of change in each unique situation or context. Sandmann and Vandenberg (1995) described important themes for 21st century community leadership, including shared leadership, building relationships, and understanding community context.

Community (in this context) refers to a group of people who share common values or beliefs, but the term is not necessarily limited to a geographical location. McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified the four elements of community, which included: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Communities form and evolve over time as dynamic social organizations, some of which function with a high degree of definition, while others operate much more loosely. As a result, another emphasis within the Community Leadership major emerged—community outreach education—which is critical to strengthen people's lives and communities through non-formal education.

Based on individual studies and faculty assessments, the term "Community Leadership" was selected as an appropriate name for this major in order to communicate the knowledge and skills graduates are expected to develop—(1) an awareness of *leadership principles* and theories that combine the need for continuous change with appropriate influence strategies and (2) the capacity to exert a leadership influence in the context of *communities and members* linked by common values and/or shared beliefs.

Community Leadership as a New Major

Prior to the transition, undergraduate students in the department selected from majors in Agricultural Communication or Agricultural and Extension Education with specializations in Teacher Education, Extension Education, or Leadership. Coursework in the Extension Education specialization focused on program development, teaching methods, communications, and program management (Scheer, Ferrari, Earnest, & Connors, 2006). During the quarter to semester transition, Agriscience Education was developed as a separate major to prepare students for teaching agriculture in secondary schools. Community Leadership emerged as a new undergraduate major that integrated the land-grant teaching and outreach functions, building upon similarities that existed between previous Extension Education and Leadership specializations.

The undergraduate major Community Leadership encompasses two specializations: (a) Community & Extension Education and (b) Leadership (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Community Leadership Major



The primary mission and curricular emphasis were as follows:

- **Mission:** to prepare future community leaders, Extension educators, practitioners, and outreach/engagement professionals to promote positive change through learning partnerships that strengthen individuals, families, and communities.
- **Curriculum emphasis:** focuses on leadership that involves preparing graduates with the capacity to influence positive change.

Core courses for all majors and specific courses for each specialization are listed in Table 1.

Table 1.
Course Requirements for Community Leadership Major and Specializations

Both Specializations	Leadership	Community & Extension Education
Introduction to Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership	Publication Design and Production	Program Planning and Evaluation
Foundations of Personal and Professional Leadership	Campaign Design and Management in Agricultural Organizations	Methods of Teaching in Non-formal Learning Environments
Advanced Agricultural Communication Technology	Internship in Community Leadership	Internship In Community and Extension Education
Leadership in Teams and Community Organizations	Leadership Practicum – Capstone and Issues	Capstone in Community and Extension Education
Volunteer and Human	Choice of:	Issues in Community

Resource Management	Principles of Agribusiness Management; Staffing Concepts and Competencies for Acquiring Talent	and Extension Education
Professional Leadership Ethics	Choice of: Salesmanship in Agriculture; Methods of Teaching; Introduction to Interpersonal Communications	
Toward Cultural Proficiency		
Leadership in Community Development		
<p><i>Note.</i> Courses listed in table are courses required for the major and do not include general education requirements, minor courses, or electives.</p>		

Implications

Implications resulting from the creation of the Community Leadership major are twofold. First, Community Leadership and its two specialization areas (Community & Extension Education and Leadership) describe the curriculum and course content that is based on the research focusing on required competencies to be successful in outreach and Extension education (Scheer et al., 2011) and in the area of leadership (Moulton, Sunardi, & Ambrosini, 2006). Initial student input on the new major and associated curriculum has been overwhelmingly positive, including comments such as:

"Because of my experiences and hands-on learning through field experience, I was offered a full-time job before I even graduated"

"Community & Extension Education allows students to develop networking and confidence to teach in formal or non-formal settings"

Second, recent research on emerging occupations in the 21st century identify the need to develop human capital through process-oriented skills that respond to consumer needs and incorporate shared leadership practices. As a result, Community Leadership majors are better prepared for positions in Extension systems, outreach and engagement, leadership roles in profit/non-profit organizations, in addition to many other career opportunities, depending on their choice of academic

minor, dual major, and/or internship experience(s).

Summary

The program described here links undergraduate degree program specializations of Leadership and Community and Extension Education. The major strengthens the "service to society" culture of the land-grant university system by preparing students for Extension/outreach systems and leadership positions in a variety of community contexts. The resource required for implementation was primarily faculty time and commitment to implement the change, including: conducting research and literature reviews to identify the skills and competencies needed for Community & Extension Education and Leadership; collecting and analyzing stakeholder input; and navigating the bureaucracy of a university to obtain support and approval for the new major.

Land-grant universities that are interested in revising their undergraduate programs in leadership, outreach, and Extension education should consider these recommendations:

- Find your niche: focus on institutional strengths with limited resources (Bonnen, 1998);
- View challenges as opportunities to rethink how and what you do; and
- Use this model as a prototype for curriculum development and revision.

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