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Unlocking Public Value: An Evaluation of the Impact of Missouri's Great Northwest Day at the Capitol Program

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Unlocking Public Value: An Evaluation of the Impact of Missouri's Great Northwest Day at the Capitol Program

Abstract

The study reported here is an evaluation of the public value of a regional public policy engagement program. Data were obtained through surveys and document analysis. The study observed peer-learning and networking opportunities as some of the most impactful elements of GNWD at the Capitol in creating public value. Building coalitions of interest among diverse sectors of the population strengthens the development of public value. For Extension, these findings suggest that programming that focuses on collaborative efforts holds promise for sustaining communities. Extension can be the glue that permeates professional/sectoral boundaries and bonds the different fields together.

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Introduction

Through a variety of programs and initiatives, including but not limited to, organizational and community leadership development, local food systems, youth and adult partnerships programs, and health lifestyle initiatives, organizations are investing millions of dollars in building community capacity. In Missouri, Extension programs, such as Step Up to Leadership, Missouri Extension Leadership Development, Leadership Northwest Missouri (LNWMO), EXperience in Community Enterprise and Leadership, and Great Northwest Day at the Capitol (GNWD), are examples of private and public value enhancing efforts. Decision-makers, stakeholders, as well as the general public, are concerned with the impact of tax payer-funded programs, including Extension, in building healthy communities. Therefore, accountability for investment of both private and public funds in educational programming has increasingly become central to the sustainability of programs.

The study reported here showcases one of the most successful LNWMO program spin-offs—GNWD, a brainchild of the 2001 and 2002 LNWMO classes (Maltsberger & Majee, 2012). GNWD is a regional

effort to engage elected officials with their citizens in formulating legislation that benefits the region as well as the state. Since its inception in 2003, the initiative has grown to include 20 communities from 18 counties and has an average of 350 people from the region participating in the program annually. However, no comprehensive study has been done to assess the impact the program is having in shaping the community and regional economy of northwest Missouri. This has created an information gap that the study reported here will fill. The critical questions we ask are: What public value has GNWD unlocked for the region? What is the return on investment for GNWD? Answers to these questions will assist sponsors/funders, program providers, and Extension workers in strengthening existing and/or designing new programs that better meet the needs of communities.

Literature Review

There is a growing body of literature on public value (Franz, 2011; Grigg & Mager, 2005; Kalambokidis, 2004, 2011; Kalambokidis & Bipes, 2007; Mager, 2007; Moore, 1995; Morse, 2010). According to the literature, public value is created when a service/program makes a positive contribution to the individual and collective lives of society as a whole (California Arts Council, n.d.; Kalambokidis, 2004). Moore (1995) states that public value theory connects what elected officials perceive as valuable with what citizens value. This underscores the need for a mutual engagement between legislators and their constituencies. Thus, it can be asserted that "relationship building and strengthening, issue relevance, and return on investment of policymaking" are the arteries that keep the heart of public value theory pumping (California Arts Council, n.d.; Moore, 1995; Morse, 2010). From an Extension perspective, this speaks to the importance of stakeholder relations and collaboration. Through collaboration in addressing regional issues, and through engaging all stakeholders, "citizens can and do develop a different kind of civic culture that makes their communities and regions stronger and more effective" (Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center Organizer Workbook, p. 48).

Research regarding collaboration for public purposes (Follet, 1924; Linden, 2002; Luke, 1998) is very clear about the role of leadership in the success or failure of such endeavors. Leaders in all spheres need to think and work across boundaries both to build and accomplish collaborative visions through joint goal setting and active pursuit of those goals. However, community members tend to underestimate their role in the public policymaking process. Yet, for progressive community and overall well-being, both citizens and elected officials should be equally engaged in processing public priorities (Moore, 1995). Use of public value theory in exploring GNWD is aimed at attaining a holistic view, from citizens to lawmakers, of the impact the program is having on the well-being of society.

The case study focuses on a program provided in a rural 18-county region in northwest Missouri with a total population of 267,895 people (Census, 2010). Since 2003, GNWD has grown to become a major legislative event that annually mobilizes 350-400 regional citizens to develop collaborative initiatives. Participants converge at the Capitol and present priority concerns of the region to, and request support for specific solutions from, legislators. The overarching goal of the program is to create results-oriented networks that will build individual and community capacities and participants' knowledge base on policymaking processes. Each year an Issues Committee polls regional citizens regarding needs of the region. Between three and four priority issues are identified and developed as

speaking points for the annual event. The program schedule includes: issue panel discussion over luncheon for all participants; community legislative visits; community roundtables with selected state departments; tour of the governor's mansion; and community/county booths during an evening reception with legislators. Issues that have been presented to legislators include transportation and infrastructure funding, statewide 9-1-1 wireless emergency services, unfunded and underfunded mandates on local entities, and regional access to a sufficient and safe water supply (GNWD Brochures, 2009, 2010, 2011).

Methods

Two main data collection methods were used: online survey (using SurveyMonkey software) and document review. The study, including survey questions and participant consent forms, were designed by a team of researchers from the University of Missouri and later reviewed and approved by the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board (IRB). Consents to participate and use participants' names were secured electronically via email. Where consent to use names was not granted, pseudonyms were used. Of the 543 invitations, 108 program participants completed the survey. The 543 were initially drawn from the 2009, 2010, and 2011 GNWD registration lists, which had a pool of 694, of which 151 had no email address on file. Among the 543, 98 were local and state elected officials. Although two reminder notices were sent to participants, the response rate stagnated at 20%. This was due mainly to the fact that, in some cases, participants from one organization used a general work email, in which case only one of the participants completed the survey. Also, some businesses restrict external use of Internet during work hours, and in such cases potential participants were not able to complete the survey.

Document analysis involved reviewing newspaper articles, LNWMO website browsing, issues committee minutes, and GNWD brochures, program agendas, and registration material. These data sources provided information on program history, graduates' social and demographic information, and documented program benefits.

Data was cleaned, coded, and analyzed. Cleaning of data involved clarification of comments with respondents and designating unclear responses as missing data. Qualitative analysis consisted of reading all comments and explanations to responses and categorizing them into "exploratory" themes that addressed the purpose and key questions of our study. Coding of quantitative data focused on responses that could be given numerical values. We used descriptive analyses such as percentages, proportions, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulation to generate insights. Data collected through document review supplemented survey data. This enhanced both the credibility and completeness of our findings.

Findings

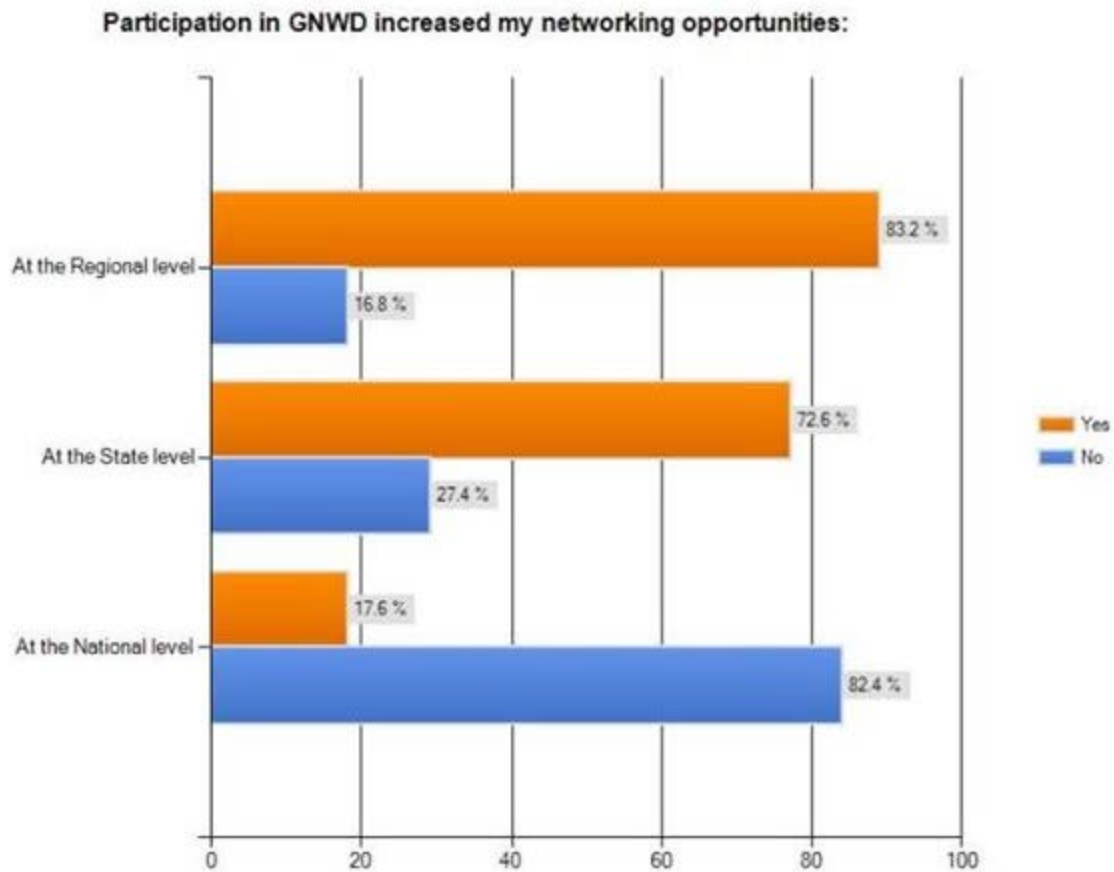
Survey data show that GNWD at the Capitol has been successful both in offering a valuable experience that cannot otherwise be found locally and in building the capacity of its participants to take on community and regional leadership through increased networking and communication. In addition, the GNWD at the Capitol experience has made state government more accessible and responsive to regional needs.

Networking

The responses of a majority of survey participants coalesced around the conclusion that the fostering of peer-learning and networking opportunities are some of the most impactful parts of GNWD at the Capitol. Figure 1 below summarizes the responses to the question on networking.

Figure 1.

Participation and Changes in Networking



Of all survey participants:

- 83% (90) have experienced increased regional networking opportunities
- 73% (79) noted an increase in statewide networking opportunities
- 18% (19) reported increased national networking opportunities
- 71% (77) increased their contact with public officials
- 78% (84) presented community needs to public officials
- 70% (76) expressed desired solutions to public officials

In some cases relationships that were formed and strengthened at GNWD have already contributed to continued learning and sharing among community members, and this has resulted in the implementation of local projects. According to Ginny Vernon, a community member who has participated in GNWD for more than 5 years,

One of my personal greatest benefits - was learning how Bethany financed their new Hospital project. I was on the Fairfax Hospital Board at the time and we were starting the process of building a new hospital. I brought that information home with me and suggested we look into a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) loan like Bethany had gotten. When our Board of Directors finally made the decision to build a new hospital....I suggested we look into applying for a loan from USDA Rural Development. Several options were considered, but the USDA Rural Development guaranteed loan (\$15,000,000) was by far the best option, considering terms and interest.Because of the knowledge that had been gained by the board and the Chief Executive Officer working with USDA for the hospital loan, it was learned that there might be grants and loans that would help the City of Fairfax bring their water system up to date and them be able to certify they would have water to supply the hospital's needs. The sharing of information between communities to me is just as valuable as the information we share with our state legislators. (G. Vernon, comments to a survey question, 2011)

Many participants echoed this observation on both the private and public value of GNWD.

Effective Communication with Public Officials

Participants indicated their confidence in communicating with public officials, as well as their actual level of contact with public officials, increased after participating in GNWD. They also indicated they had learned how to utilize the public policy process. Figures 2a and 2b below provide details on this.

Figure 2a.

Changes in Knowledge and Confidence

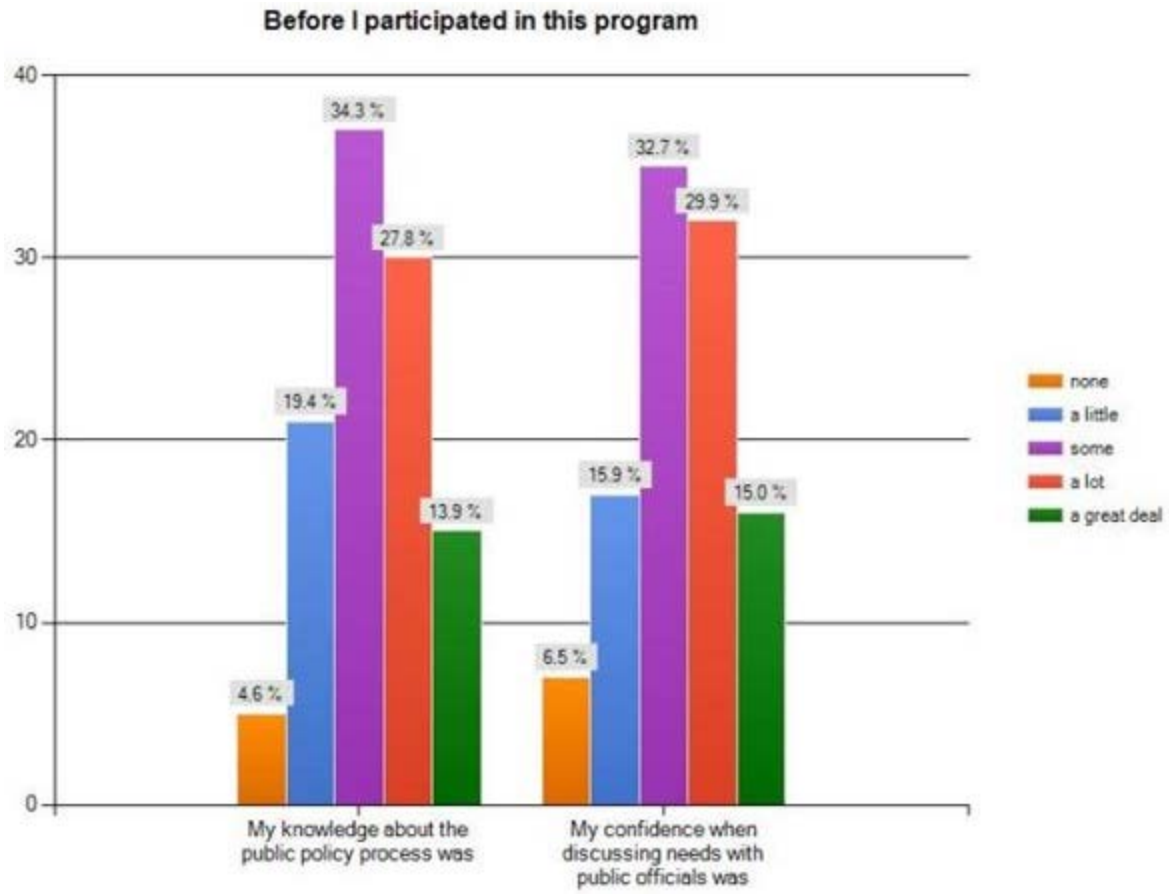
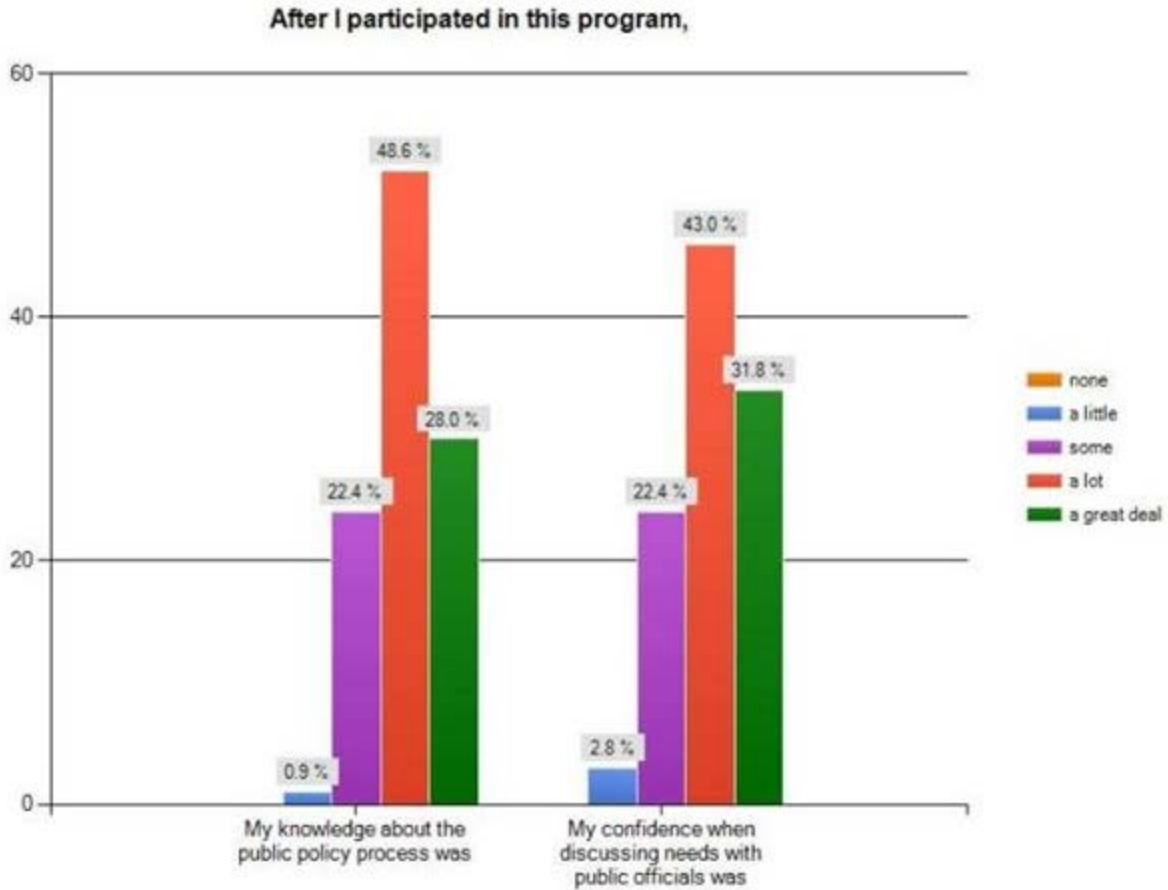


Figure 2b.
Changes in Knowledge and Confidence



The level of knowledge of the public policy process showed an increase of 54% in the areas of "a lot" and "a great deal" after attending GNWD. In those same areas, confidence in discussing needs with public officials increased by 44%. This indicates that participants are, in fact, more knowledgeable and confident when speaking to public officials about important issues after their participation in GNWD. Overall, 71% of participants indicated their contact with public officials had actually increased.

Participant statements include the following.

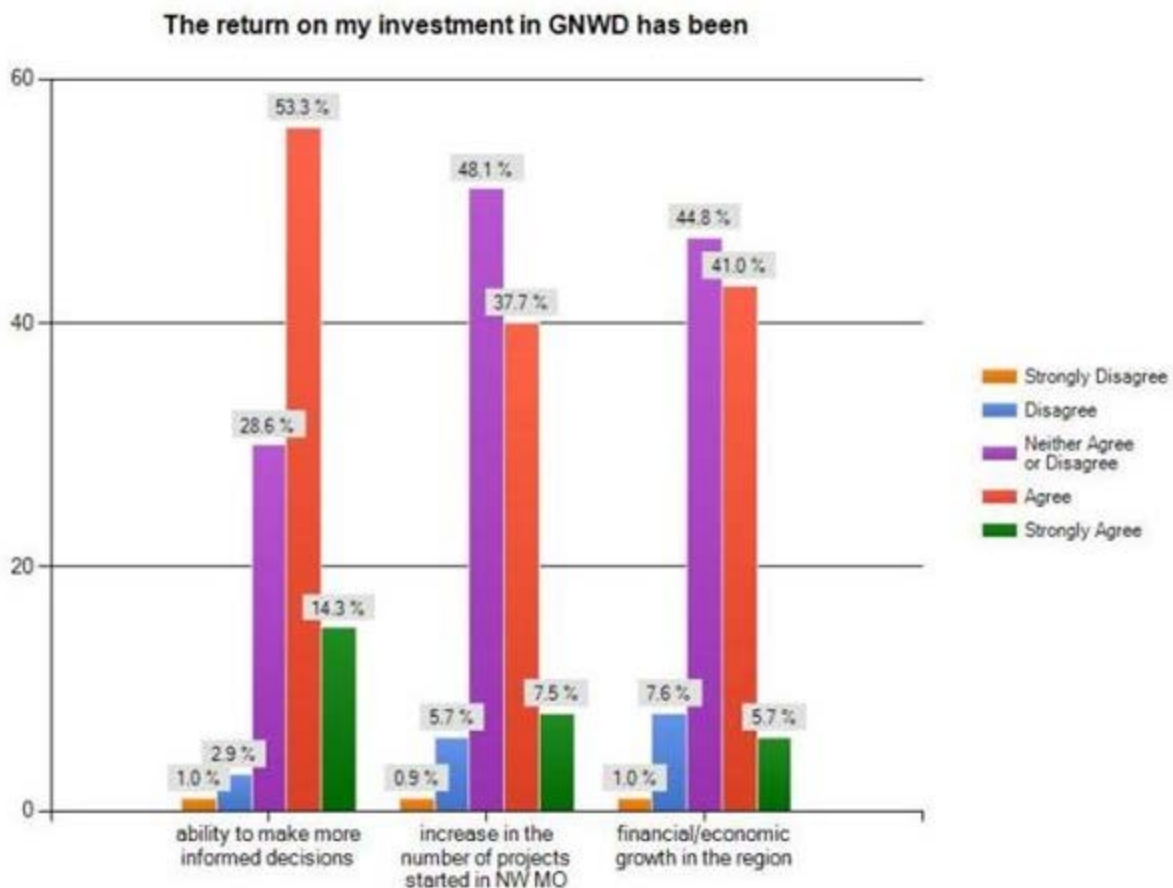
- I just feel more confident contacting public officials after attending GNWD. I have emailed a couple of my local officials on needs both as a community leader and a citizen. *Stephanie Patterson*
- The event gave me the opportunity for some face to face conversations that helped me establish rapport with state elected officials. *Steve Hamilton*
- It made political issues relevant to me, whereas before I didn't know and didn't care. *George Smith*
- On the local level I have made presentations to the City Council about concerns over our codes and run down houses. On the county level I have taken requests and made presentations to the county commissioners asking for their human and financial resources for economic development. On the state level I have met several times with and attended town hall meetings with (my) representative and senator. *Gloria Everton*

- There is no better way to communicate our message than real people sharing it with elected officials. *Senator Brad Lager - District 12(NW-Missouri)*
- It provided an opportunity for those legislators NOT from the Northwest region to be welcomed in a warm way and to receive an abundance of education from the very able presenters and groups representing the region. *Representative Timothy W. Jones - District 89*
- It brings together the community leaders of the region in a friendly environment that allows for very constructive and positive conversations. *Dan Niec - MoDOT, North Central District*

Return on Investment

In response to the question on realized return on invest for participating in GNWD, 68% agreed they have increased their ability to make more informed decisions, 45% affirmed that there has been an increase in the number of projects started in northwest Missouri as a result of participating in GNWD, and 47% agreed that there are financial/economic growth benefits in the region. Figure 3 presents a detailed breakdown of the percentages.

Figure 3.
Return on Investment



Discussion

Franz (2011), Kalambokidis (2004), and Kalambokidis & Bipes (2007) argue for an embrace of public value thinking from both within and without Extension. They advanced the use of "impact statements" and "success stories" (Franz, p.3) in order to slow down and eventually stop the decline Extension is enduring as an institution. Along the same vein of telling the Extension story, the study reported here assesses the impact an Extension program spin-off has had on participants and their communities as informed by public value thinking.

It is evident from the study that participants believed that the public value of GNWD lies in the experiential learning opportunities, trust and relationship building, and collaborative work that have emerged among participating individuals and communities. GNWD has helped participants to tear down personal and professional silos. The experience of interacting with other community members and state government officials allows participants to get outside of their comfort zones, thereby promoting trust building and collaborative action. In line with literature on public value theory (Kalambokidis, 2004; Moore, 1995; Morse, 2010) participation in GNWD helped to build new and strengthen old relationships in ways that provided both community benefits (public value) and personal rewards (private value). Seeing the examples of others strengthened the confidence and courage of participants to take on community development issues in their own communities. This stemmed from increased awareness of policymaking processes which in turn motivated regional residents to engage in shaping public policy.

A case in point is Ginny Vernon's story of how the City of Fairfax has worked towards building its own hospital. This highlights one major work in progress that came to fruition as a result of knowledge and relationships acquired at GNWD. Another example is the support GNWD provides to the Great Northwest Regional Wholesale Water Commission in securing financial support for feasibility and engineering studies. The commission is committed to providing a safe and sufficient water supply across nine counties in northwest Missouri. As a result of their participation in GNWD, community members have also been able to re-enforce to legislators and state agencies, the need for safe water in northwest Missouri.

Through this practice of collaborative leadership, local residents continue to gain an understanding of how to support legislators and develop individual, sector, community, and regional capacity. This shared understanding of community issues and potential solutions clears the arteries of public value initiatives. Thus, the innovative aspect of GNWD is the teaming up of regional residents to identify issues that affect their well-being, exploring effective strategies and approaches to address them, and communicating with people who have the authority to allocate resources. As Morse (2007) stated, the so-called "steering of society" is a collective accomplishment of many actors—public and private. By building coalitions of interest and working in partnership with business leaders, politicians, leaders of faith-based organizations, and community members, GNWD not only makes personal and professional boundaries more permeable, but also fosters an environment in which public sector leaders engage with their citizens, and agree, prior to project implementation, on what constitutes public value in that specific context.

When citizens participate in GNWD, they learn valuable information and develop effective

communication skills that help them express their needs to elected officials. By knowing how to effectively present identified needs and by requesting specific actions from elected officials, the citizens of northwest Missouri are able to influence the use of their tax dollars and improve the quality of life for local residents (public value).

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated the ripple effect of Extension programming and that achieving sustainable, healthy communities is going to take commitment from professionals and leaders from diverse sectors, and community members working collaboratively. Extension, using its strong history of local presence, can help bridge the gap between knowledge and practice in communities by fully documenting the value of Extension programs. Until this practice is fully embraced and credit for the good work Extension does is solidified through convincing public value statements, Extension will continue to be viewed as an organization in decline, and funding streams will continue to dry up, as they have done in recent years.

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