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Community Directed Leadership Programs in Wyoming

Cole Ehmke

University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service, wheatranger@yahoo.com

Rhonda Shipp

University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service, rshipp@parkcounty.us



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Community Directed Leadership Programs in Wyoming

Abstract

Efforts to increase local support for community leadership programs have led Wyoming to develop a very heavy emphasis on local direction and delivery. The Wyoming concept features programs led by a volunteer steering committee and guided by general parameters.

Cole Ehmke

University Extension Specialist
Laramie, Wyoming
cehmke@uwyo.edu

Rhonda Shipp

University Extension Educator
Cody, Wyoming
rshipp@parkcounty.us

University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service

In recent years the problems of achieving local buy-in for community leadership development programs have pressed educators to create innovative educational services. In Wyoming we have avoided formulating a rigid pattern of approach to designing leadership programs. To the contrary, we have developed a special emphasis on local design to meet varying educational needs. The current approach to community leadership development is a process that engages the local community to construct program content relevant to the local needs.

A local-needs emphasis is not new, of course. Programs that include local input are widespread: examples from this journal include Hughes (1998), Langone (1992) and Tackie, Findlay, Baharanyi and Pierce (2004), among others. But with the Wyoming approach the emphasis is much greater: with each program the curriculum is designed, developed, and delivered by a broad-based collaborative community steering committee.

Wyoming's approach is called EVOLVE (Extension Volunteer Organization for Leadership, Vitality and Enterprise). The EVOLVE concept has a few broad minimum parameters for what must be included in the program (as opposed to a pre-defined curriculum, or even a menu of program topics). Consequently it is adaptable to any community because the curriculum is created by community volunteers based on their unique needs and resources. As a collaborative endeavor EVOLVE provides the benefits noted by Banach, Zunz, and LaPointe (2006) and Strieter and Blalock (2006). And as a leadership program it can fulfill the training elements suggested by Paxson, Howell, Michael, and Wong (1993).

Core Components

Each EVOLVE leadership institute is guided by a local steering committee composed of representative community residents. This committee designs the curriculum and selects the program participants. While the specific objectives set by the steering committee vary from institute to institute, components core to each leadership institute include:

1. Increasing human capacity by developing individual leadership skills,
2. Increasing social capacity using community-based experiences that strengthen the understanding of resources and issues, and

3. Incorporating a group project to practice what is learned.

The underlying motivation behind the core components is to provide experiences through which program participants may understand issues, become aware of the resources available, develop leadership skills within communities, and increase involvement in the community.

To meet the core component requirement of developing individual leadership skills, program content may include skill-building days; a day of observation and assessment of each individual's leadership skills, strengths, and weaknesses; reading assignments; and the development of a personal leadership philosophy. Specific skills developed often include teamwork, communication, planning, change and conflict management, and social responsibility.

To meet the community-based experience component, participants are expected each month to undertake at least one outside activity, such as visiting the hospital and health care system, the school system, a business, etc., and making a report on the experience.

Group projects have two requirements. First, every student in the leadership institute must be involved, and second, the project must be of benefit to all the communities involved in the institute. The steering committee may choose to provide general parameters for the project (such as, that it involve children), or the institute may select its own focus. Projects have involved the cleanup of the banks of a popular river, honoring students who serve the community, and the cleanup of 24 miles of highway lying between two alienated communities by members of the communities.

Other Institute Features

The role of the county Extension educator is primarily as coordinator, working in conjunction with the steering committee. The educator might also teach specific elements of the curriculum the steering committee builds. However, the institute is used as a venue to develop skills, so past participants are expected to teach most of the classes. The educator would likely teach presenters how to create and teach good presentations.

EVOLVE leadership development institutes are usually 8 months in length and consist of monthly day-long classes on various topics of importance, opening with a retreat to facilitate participant bonding and to develop enthusiasm for the rest of the institute. Often a year of assessing needs and planning by the steering committee is required before an institute occurs.

Participants are selected to create a purposefully diverse program--one in which all kinds of citizens are represented. As far as leadership skill, students range from those with no experience in leadership roles (but who have potential), to those already in leadership positions.

Community participation in the programs is typically high. For instance, in one program there were 13 committee members, 10 instructors, 19 affiliates (who provided community-based experiences), and 16 sponsors (a total of 58). Each institute is involved in the next, perhaps by sitting on the steering committee or as instructors (in which they have the opportunity to learn more) or as hosts of community-based experiences or in whatever way they best can.

The practices and procedures have evolved over the course of the 10 years leadership institutes have been offered. A distillation of the program has been captured in a notebook containing information, forms, and tools developed by steering committees. This notebook is available from the authors.

Program Outcomes

We believe the key strength of the EVOLVE program to be that it is the local community that makes the final decisions on what is best to include and how to configure their leadership institute. Participant assessments and comments on the individual institutes indicate that the program is of great value. Participants have increased leadership, teamwork, and communication skills. They have also realized the value of collaboration, involvement, and diversity through service learning activities. Additionally they have gained insight into the resources of the community and expanded their personal networks. One participant said that more had been learned about county resources in the 7 months of the program than in the previous 30 years.

The program has been successfully replicated in eight Wyoming counties and one Idaho county. EVOLVE was introduced to Extension community development specialists and educators in neighboring states through a conference underwritten by the Western Rural Development Center in May, 2005.

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