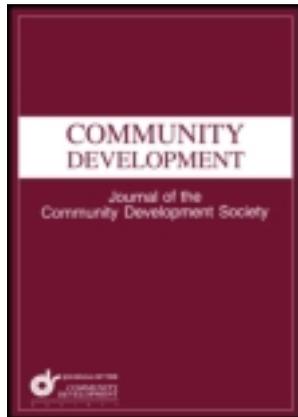


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Can leadership development act as a rural poverty alleviation strategy?

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Though it is a pervasive problem, relatively little research focuses on rural poverty and leadership initiatives designed to alleviate rural poverty. Using a comparative case study approach, this article assesses community-level change in rural communities in Montana and Minnesota that participated in Horizons, a leadership development program that seeks to encourage community action to reduce poverty. We focus on the effects of various strategies for Horizons implementation in Montana and Minnesota as a possible explanation for different community-level outcomes experienced in these states. We argue that different methods of Horizons implementation influenced the skills and knowledge that coaches brought to their communities and also helped to determine how receptive communities were toward working with coaches. Research results also indicate that relatively minor investments in leadership development can yield dramatic changes in a community's capacity to identify and address problems.

Keywords: leadership; poverty; rural community development; citizen participation

Introduction

Research on poverty in the United States focuses predominantly on urban (Jargowsky, 1997) and suburban (Holliday & Dwyer, 2009) settings despite scholarship showing poverty is highest and most persistent in rural areas (Weber, Jensen, Miller, Mosley, & Fisher, 2005). To some extent, the research emphasis on urban and suburban areas is relevant given that rural areas have comparatively far fewer residents. On the other hand, rural areas tend to have low population densities and substantial distances between people and services compared to urban and suburban areas. For rural areas, these characteristics may exacerbate some of the other problems often found in poor communities, including long histories (including generational) of poverty, recent demographic changes, a lack of local expertise to address poverty, inadequate local governance structures, and a lack of trust between community members (Erickson, Reid, Nelson, O'Shaughnessy, & Berube, 2008). Given the particular circumstances of poverty in rural America, programs that seek to address this condition will have to be exceptionally innovative and creative.

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The fundamental question guiding this research is, can a leadership development program reduce poverty in a community, and if so, how can this program be best implemented and evaluated? Funded by the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAFF), the Horizons program seeks to address rural poverty by promoting local leadership and focusing community action on poverty reduction strategies. Drawing upon the power of public discourse (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1927) and an assets-based community development approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), the Horizons program has been implemented in nearly 300 communities in seven states during an eight-year period (2003–2010). The Horizons program guides communities through conversations about poverty; helps to develop local leadership; facilitates the creation of a community vision; and implements actions and evaluates outcomes toward making the vision a reality. As such, Horizons does not focus solely on economic development or human capital accumulation strategies that are more typically associated with poverty alleviation in the US. Instead, it focuses on leadership development to provide community residents with the skills to self-design and implement poverty reduction programs.

Despite a desired uniform program design by the NWAFF, the experiences of Horizons communities within and across states have varied tremendously. Some communities have embraced the spirit of Horizons that stresses communicative dialogue; the expansion of voices in the community visioning and planning process; and a focus on collective action via relational leadership. At the same time, other communities have failed to meaningfully incorporate these aspects of Horizons. In addition, some action plans produced by Horizons communities lack direct connections to reducing poverty, while other action plans include initiatives that squarely address poverty. A large part of assessing the relationship between Horizons and community-level change is determining the factors that account for the varied experiences and outcomes in Horizons communities.

This article focuses on factors that explain variation in how communities participating in Horizons approached community-level leadership and problem-solving. We focus on these issues instead of actual poverty reduction for two reasons. First, the task of tracing the causal effect of a single program on a problem as intractable as poverty is exceptionally difficult and likely made even more difficult by the presence of dynamic exogenous factors, such as changes in the economy. Second, given the short amount of time that has elapsed since the completion of Horizons in these communities it is more appropriate to focus on intermediate outcomes. Thus, this article has two primary contributions to an understanding of community-level change. First, the article offers a detailed description of a relational leadership development program outside of an organizational context, something that is relatively scarce in the leadership literature. Second, the article makes the case that a relational leadership development program can enhance the capacity of communities to acknowledge and address seemingly intractable issues, like poverty.

The remainder of this article is divided into four sections. The first section reviews the literature on relational leadership and describes why the Horizons program is an example of a relational leadership development program. The second section describes results from pre- and post-data that assess the extent to which participants in Horizons programs in two states acquired new knowledge about poverty, ways of reducing poverty and leadership skills. The third section describes two case studies on Horizons implementation in Montana and Minnesota. These case studies provide examples from communities participating in the Horizons

program that indicate how personnel, community context, and the interaction between personnel and context help to explain the variation in experiences of Horizons communities in the two states. The fourth section describes the broad findings from these case studies and discusses the implications of these findings for other community change programs.

The relational turn in leadership studies

Relational conceptions of leadership focus on the interstitial areas between leaders and followers with special emphasis on interconnectedness and co-evolution (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Another approach to relational leadership posits that relationships between individuals and organizations are constructed as part of a process and are embedded in a broader societal system (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). Most important for purposes of this article, this approach, known as the constructionist approach, argues that the function of leadership in communities is to take joint action (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Some consider relational leadership as a trend that has developed because of the increasingly fragmented nature of power (Crosby & Bryson, 2005) and stress the need for new types of integrated leadership approaches privileging collaborative and cross-sector relationships that facilitate community problem-solving and citizen engagement (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). These scholars see civic engagement as a means to an end. In other words, participatory processes and community problem-solving initiatives shape leadership by bringing a more diverse set of voices into the framing of common purposes and creating a more fluid relationship between leaders and followers.

In contrast, others focus on leadership as a process that shapes the relationships between leaders and followers (Drath, 2001; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Rather than focus on the circumstances that produce different interpersonal dynamics related to leadership, these scholars conceptualize leadership as the meaning-making that occurs within groups as various members set a direction and face inevitable adaptive challenges (Drath, 2001; Ospina & Foldy, 2010). As such, civic engagement and related dialogue is part and parcel of the leadership process, and are examples and products of meaning-making and direction-setting.

To date, much of the research that uses the relational perspective of leadership as a lens to understand community development has focused on organizational contexts. For example, Ospina and Foldy's (2010) research on social change organizations focused on a sample of small, non-profit organizations that worked on issues ranging from public health to immigration to homelessness. It may be important to develop a separate vein of research that focuses on leadership in communities since leadership research from organizational settings may be inappropriately applied to leadership in community contexts because community leaders typically lack the formal authority and power vested in positional leaders of organizations (Pigg, 1999). Instead, community leaders use interactions with a diverse set of social ties as a source of power (O'Brien & Hassinger, 1992) to create a common purpose and influence community change with this purpose in mind. Synthesizing the work of a leadership theorist (Rost, 1991) and a community development theorist (Wilkinson, 1991), Pigg (1999) argues that community development leadership focuses more on relationships than people, and more on purpose than effectiveness. In other words, it is the process of reaching consensus on

a common purpose through a dialogue that strengthens relationships between community residents and allows the improvement of various aspects of community development (e.g. economic development, environmental protection, etc.) that serve the greater well-being of community residents (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1927; Wilkinson, 1991).

The Horizons program as relational leadership development

The Horizons program is a multi-state leadership development program with the expressed intent of reducing poverty in rural communities. The rationale behind the program is that the combination of increased awareness of poverty, including different conceptions of what poverty is and the causes of poverty, and improved leadership skills in tandem with civic engagement between community members will result in action to address the incidental, operational, and systemic causes of poverty. The design of Horizons was predicated on several ideas: poverty erodes hope in communities; reducing poverty is a responsibility of all community members; communities possess many of the assets needed to address poverty, but often lack the leadership capacity needed to use those assets; and when building leadership capacity communities would benefit from working with an experienced partner (Hoelting, 2010). In defining poverty, Horizons adopts an encompassing view similar to that of Payne (1996) that acknowledges economic as well as non-economic dimensions.

Deployed in Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Washington State between 2003 and 2010, Horizons included four phases and reached a total of 283 communities. In each state, university Extension programs worked with steering committees in each community to deliver the Horizons program, which consists of four phases: Study Circles, LeadershipPlenty[®], the creation of a community vision, and the development of action plans to address poverty.

Patterned from a curriculum developed by the organization Everyday Democracy, Study Circles are focused community dialogues on poverty that are broken into six sessions and cumulatively last approximately 12 h. Community members are trained to facilitate the conversations, which explore different ways of thinking about poverty as well as the causes and consequences of poverty.

Developed by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, LeadershipPlenty[®] is a nine module leadership development training that focuses on a variety of skills, such as identifying community assets, resolving conflict, managing group dynamics, running effective meetings, and building strategic partnerships. LeadershipPlenty[®] uses a train-the-trainer model that incorporates at least three local trainers who deliver the curriculum to a minimum of 20 community members over approximately 40 h. Following the leadership training, steering committees in each community lead a visioning process with a goal to establish a collective vision of a new direction for the community. Steering committees are required to involve at least 15% of community residents in this process. At the conclusion of the visioning process, participants identify two to five priority areas for action to address poverty. Volunteers sign up to lead different areas of these action plans, using a grant of \$10,000 from the Northwest Area Foundation.

In each phase of the Horizons program, a community coach plays a prominent role. Recently, several foundations and community development organizations have stressed the potentially pivotal role of community coaches in encouraging sustainable community change. Among other things, the role of community coaches

is to push groups that are working on a community issue to see the bigger community picture for a given question or problem; identify potential collaborators; and highlight learning opportunities (Emery, Hubbell, & Polka, 2011). Each community participating in the Horizons program used a community coach as a liaison with Extension, as well as to ensure that each facet of Horizons included multiple perspectives from the community and that the community conversations and visioning continued to focus on poverty alleviation.

Coaches helped communities to understand the expectations of the NAWF and, therefore, ensured that the communities could access funds that were contingent upon reaching various milestones in the Horizons program. For example, achieving a minimum threshold of participation by community members in each program component was a requirement for communities before they could access certain pools of funding. Coaches also helped motivate the steering committee and other community members to move from one stage of Horizons to the next. Thus, the presence of coaches was integral to successful completion of the Horizons program by participating communities.

Because of its emphasis on dialogue, relationships, consensus-building, and an expansive definition of leader that encompasses positional leaders as well as “ordinary” residents, we consider the Horizons program to be an excellent example of community-level relational leadership development. As conceived in the review of leadership literature above, Horizons is a community-level process that constructs meaning (What is poverty?), sets a direction for action (What changes can we make to address the systemic nature of poverty?), and creates commitment for change (What groups of people will work to implement our proposed changes?). Of the components of Horizons, LeadershipPlenty[®] and its focus on individual skills is least associated with relational leadership. We argue that training community participants in individual leadership skills (working well with groups, convening more effective meetings, managing conflict, etc.) was of secondary importance for the successes in Horizons when compared to the rich dialogues and relationship building that occurred because of the Study Circles and community visioning exercises.

Research methods

A comparative case study approach was used to examine Horizons communities in Minnesota and Montana. A case study research design based on Yin (2002) compared aspects of each case study to highlight the specific approaches used in the communities, the process that communities followed as they went through Horizons, and the significant outcomes within communities. However, statistical relationships were not estimated, and no claims are made that the research results presented are generalizable to other communities.

Prior to presenting case studies pre- and post-evaluation data from Horizons are first analyzed to assess changes in knowledge of poverty and leadership for Horizons participants for respondents in 29 communities in Minnesota (Horizons Phase Two and Three) and in 16 communities in Montana (Horizons Phase Two). Participants in Study Circles and LeadershipPlenty[®] were asked to rate their understanding of poverty and leadership practices before and after discussions of poverty and leadership trainings. While the original intention was to include all participants in Study Circles and LeadershipPlenty[®] trainings in the sample, some Horizons communities experienced modest attrition in their participants due to time and other

constraints. In all, responses from 1130 Study Circle participants (450 from Montana and 680 from Minnesota) and 763 LeadershipPlenty[®] participants (307 from Montana and 456 from Minnesota) are evaluated.

Second, two case studies based on data from interviews with key informants, participant observation, focus groups, and a content analysis of documents created during the visioning process of select Horizons communities in Montana and Minnesota were developed to better understand how Horizons was implemented in each state and how the capacities of communities changed as a result of their participation in Horizons. Key informant interviews included Horizon coaches and state-level administrators. These interviews were composed of a series of open-ended questions designed to determine how coaches and administrators conceived of their roles in Horizons, how communities reacted to working with a coach, and the extent to which communities adopted Horizons principles in efforts to address public decision-making (i.e. whether communities “owned” the process or not). Finally, the authors performed a content analysis on vision statements and action plans produced by select Horizons communities to assess how closely communities connected their efforts to reduce poverty.

Results

Pre- and post-test results

Assessments conducted before and after Horizons Study Circles showed that participants improved their knowledge of issues related to poverty substantially in Montana and Minnesota. Figure 1 indicates the average knowledge score of

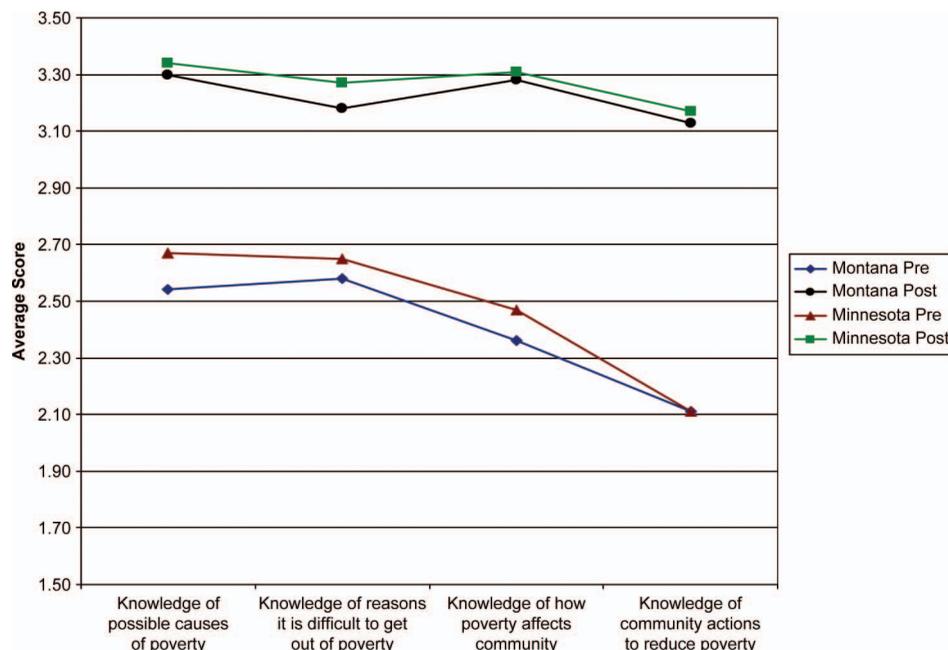


Figure 1. Selected pre- and post-test results for study circle participants in Montana ($n = 450$) and Minnesota ($n = 680$). Note: Scores based on a 4-point scale, with 1 = almost nothing and 4 = a great deal.

participants in Study Circles conducted in Horizons communities in Montana and Minnesota before and after group discussions of poverty (based on a 4-point scale with 1 = almost nothing and 4 = a great deal). The performance and knowledge gains for Study Circle participants in both states were virtually identical. The largest gains in knowledge were in areas related to how poverty affects communities and what community actions can reduce poverty. It is important to note that participants in both states started with relatively low levels of knowledge in these areas.

Figure 2 shows the self-assessments of participants in LeadershipPlenty® on changes in knowledge of leadership issues after their involvement in the program (based on a 5-point scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Again, the performance of participants in Montana and Minnesota was very similar, with participants in Montana making slightly larger knowledge gains than those in Minnesota. At the same time, participants in both states made notable improvements in their knowledge of various facets of leadership that relational leadership theory suggests are important.

Interviews with key informants revealed that improved knowledge of poverty and leadership were necessary but insufficient conditions for producing community change. Specifically, key informants observed wide variations in the ambitiousness of community action plans and the linkage of these plans to alleviating poverty. They also observed changes in ways that communities engaged in problem solving that did

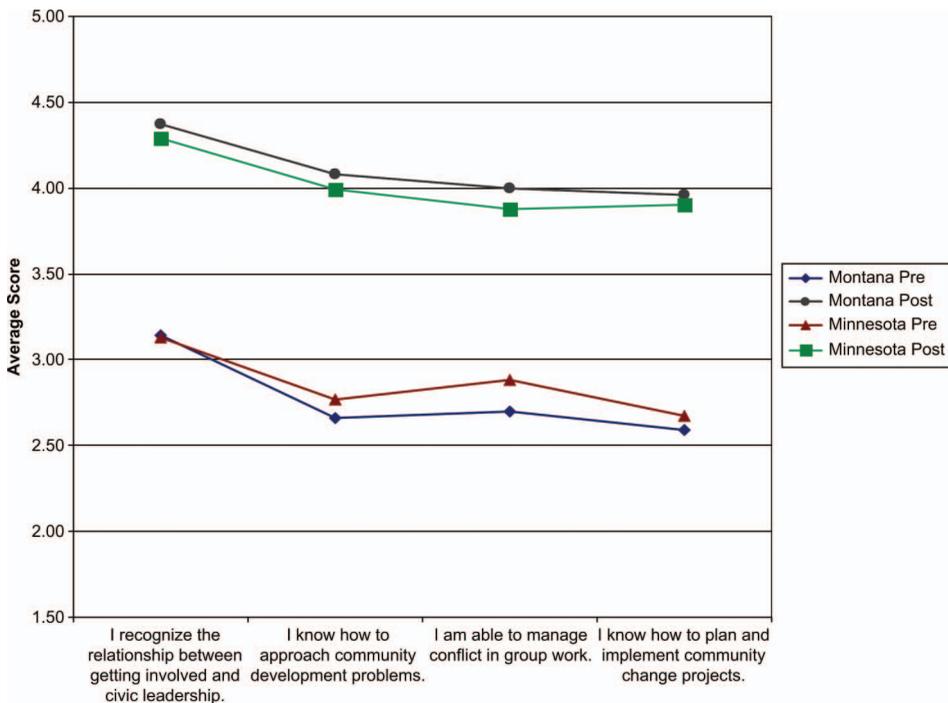


Figure 2. Selected pre- and post-test results for LeadershipPlenty® Participants in Montana ($n = 307$) and Minnesota ($n = 456$). Note: Scores based on a 5-point scale, with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

not necessarily correspond to knowledge gains on the part of Study Circles and LeadershipPlenty[®] participants. This indicates that the Horizons leadership development curriculum achieved individual empowerment as conceived by Pigg (2002).

Horizons implementation in Montana and Minnesota

The structure and desired outcome of the Horizons program in Montana and Minnesota Extension was similar, however, the programs in the two states differ significantly in terms of implementation and outcome. In Montana, most counties have an Extension office staffed by one or two Extension agents, with each agent offering programming and assistance in multiple areas. For example, depending on the needs of the county and the skills of the agent, an Extension agent may have expertise and work expectation in the areas of agriculture, youth development, family, and consumer sciences or community development. The agents typically work in one county and thus have the opportunity to establish deep connections to the communities in the county through long-term relationships with various stakeholders. This arrangement results in many Montana Extension agents having local knowledge regarding the complex web of social and institutional relationships.

In contrast to Montana's county-based system, Minnesota Extension has adopted a regional system. In this approach, Extension educators (the Minnesota equivalent to an agent) are responsible for establishing relationships and delivering programming and services in multiple counties. This results in the presence of many educators in each regional office, with each educator specializing in a core competency. For example, any given regional Extension office in Minnesota has educators specializing in crops, dairy, youth programs, natural resources, health and nutrition, family resources, livestock, environmental science, community economics, and leadership and civic engagement. The wide variety of expertise among Extension educators in a regional office is possible because of the large scale at which the educators operate. At the same time, the large territory that each regional office covers means that educators necessarily have less time to establish relationships and deliver programming in each county, much less each town, in the region.

This difference in the institutional arrangement of Extension in Montana and Minnesota resulted in important differences in how each state chose to implement Horizons. The most important implementation difference was how each state selected community coaches. Montana Extension elected to use existing county Extension agents as Horizons coaches. This decision meant that county Extension agents served as a coach for a Horizons community if it was located within their county. Typically, coaches in Montana lived in or near the communities where they served as coaches. In contrast, Minnesota Extension chose to hire coaches who had demonstrated expertise in leadership and community development, but were external to existing Extension staff. Newly-hired coaches in Minnesota worked with multiple Horizons communities at any given time, but did not live in any of the communities they served. In each state, coaches helped to establish and then were required to work closely with a steering committee in each community to implement Horizons.

Given these different implementation strategies in Minnesota and Montana, the coaches in each state likely had different strengths and weaknesses. Coaches in Montana tended to have substantial local knowledge about the institutional infrastructure in the community, a strong sense of the community's history, and

numerous personal and professional relationships with community members. At the same time, because Extension agents in Montana serve multiple roles within the Extension framework, it was not necessarily the case that each had a strongly developed expertise in general leadership or community development practice. Coaches in Minnesota typically had very little local knowledge about the institutional infrastructure in the community, a weak sense of the community's history, and few personal or professional relationships with community members. In contrast, Minnesota coaches were hired precisely because they had existing expertise in leadership and community development.

In each state, specific community characteristics such as population, poverty rate, and percent of the population involved in the leadership phases of the program are comparable. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate several of these key characteristics in each state.

The outcomes of the program involved both tangible projects that community members described in their respective vision statements and actions plans, as well as more intangible results such as increased networking in the community and trust among community residents. Table 2 illustrates the more significant tangible outcomes from Horizons communities in Montana and Minnesota.

Table 1. Select Horizons communities in Montana and Minnesota illustrating population, poverty rate, and population involved in visioning.

Community	Population (US Census 2000)	Poverty rate (%, US Census 2000)	Population involved in visioning
Montana			
Anaconda	4089	16.0	958
Big timber	1768	11.0	362
Boulder	1445	16.0	241
Brockway	140	18.8	47
Columbus	1931	14.0	295
Crow agency	1552	40.9	271
Culbertson	714	11.0	273
Forsyth	1898	11.0	377
Harlowton	899	10.3	159
Melstone	139	11.2	49
Roundup	1953	20.0	402
Scobey	958	13.0	181
Whitehall	1156	12.0	892
Wibaux	485	10.2	135
Minnesota			
Akeley	412	17.5	93
Appleton	1469	14.7	223
Braham	1276	14.0	194
Chisholm	4764	12.0	747
Elmore	704	12.0	108
Evansville	566	10.0	86
Eveleth	3709	15.0	612
Floodwood	487	19.0	73
Menasha	1220	18.7	192
Moose lake	1185	10.1	241
Pine city	3043	15.0	486
St. James	4500	11.0	726
Starbuck	1314	13.1	202
Waterville	1833	10.6	284

Table 2. Significant outcomes and brief descriptions of example outcomes from Horizons in Montana and Minnesota.

Outcome	Description
Establishment of a community foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Community foundation created to provide funds for needed projects/efforts ● Expanded scholarship opportunities
Encourage community cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Community-wide potlucks to introduce established community of new immigrants ● Creation of an “ambassadors” program to welcome newcomers
Housing rehab/affordable housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Secured housing rehab grants ● Completed a housing study ● Committees formed to co-ordinate volunteers to address housing issues ● Partnership formed with national housing organization to begin development of a self-help home ownership program ● Provided heaters at no cost for families to reduce heating costs during the winter
Youth programs, early childhood programs, after-school and mentoring activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Development of a Head Start Program, after-school program and youth mentoring programs ● Town hall meetings organized on underage drinking ● Offering youth financial literacy and personal finance classes
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Offering adult basic skills development classes ● Educational classes for the family ● Creation of “language tables” at local businesses and schools to increase resident’s proficiency in Native American languages
Addressing basic/urgent needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Created community food bank in a handicapped-accessible building ● Created community garden to help those who need food ● Revamping thrift shop
Community clean-ups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Community clean-up committee formed ● Community beautification contest organized

The outcomes in Table 2 illustrate the most popular or significant programs in the communities but this is by no means an exhaustive list. These outcomes document the observable and readily measurable changes in the communities and are attributable to the leadership and civic engagement process.

As the case studies below indicate, coaches played a significant role in the various outcomes of the Horizons program. Though increased knowledge of poverty and improved skills related to leadership were widely experienced by Horizons participants, coaches were an important driver in putting knowledge and skills to use. The effectiveness of coaches partially depended on the interaction between the nature of the coach’s connection to the community and the reception each coach received in the community. For example, small, close-knit communities that were less open to outsiders were considerably more receptive to coaches they viewed as already part of their community. On the other hand, in communities that had a less guarded orientation toward outsiders, residents seemed to be more willing to work with outside experts.

Montana Horizons

While Montana Extension worked with 16 communities in Phase II of Horizons, this section examines only two communities. The city of Smelterville¹ is nestled in the Rocky Mountains in southwestern Montana and is the government center for the county. Historically, mining was its primary industry, but with the closing of nearby mines, many jobs and subsequently, much of the tax base was lost. The city is now becoming a recreational center, with top industries being tourism, education, health, and social services. Among the many issues facing the community, approximately 20% of the local housing units are vacant and unemployment is a persistent problem.

The community reluctantly started the Horizons Program after prolonged urging from the community coach who recalled the community's attitude was, "not another community development program!?" The community had tried many programs in the past after the mining jobs were lost and most programs were not successful, so people felt that another program was not going to work now.

As was the case with most of the communities participating in the Horizons program in Montana, the coach lived in the community and was well-respected and served as an Extension agent, with established programs through the local extension office. There was also reluctance according to the coach, because the program "came from the University, and we were tired of being studied to death." The coach reported that she had to talk local leaders and other community members into participating in the program and to form a steering committee. The coach actively sought out and asked members of the community to serve on the steering committee and searched for both key leaders who were known and respected as well as new individuals who had not participated in community planning efforts in the past. According to the coach, "I had to talk leaders into serving on the steering committee, and I had to show them that there would be benefits to participating before they would go along with the program. Their plates were full."

After the Study Circles sessions, the steering committee realized the potential of the program and became more committed and enthused about volunteering time and effort to the program. The coach reports, "The steering committee is now operating independently, and getting so much done, I can hardly keep track of all of the programs and successes." For example, the many action plans that have been initiated include expanded educational opportunities for technical and trade skills training, created new community cleanup opportunities, enhanced afterschool activities for youth, building a volunteer co-ordination network, and a job training program that retrains workers for positions in better-paying jobs.

While it has been difficult to get lower-income individuals to serve on committees and participate in the program, the coach states, "Horizons did raise awareness of poverty in the community. We are much more conscious of being open and inviting and of not alienating those from different income brackets." While income and educational attainment data were not available for this community, according to survey data collected during the leadership training phase of the program, 100% of participants were white even though nearly 4% of community residents were minorities (mostly Native American).

In addition, according to the coach, it was difficult in the past to find even one person to run for some office seats and board positions, but now, "we have too many people running. People are really motivated and we attribute that to Horizons." The

coach added “trust was an important factor in getting the community to start and complete the program, and it’s an important outcome. There is a lot more trust in the community as a result of Horizons.” Trust was enhanced on two levels; first trust between the coach and community members increased because of the relationship formed through Horizons and, second, trust was enhanced between community members through leadership trainings and resulting action planning. The steering committee also continues to meet regularly and is motivated, well-organized, and open to working with new community members.

According to the coach and several steering committee members, relationships and trust were strengthened between the coach and community members and the trust that existed prior to beginning the Horizons program was reported to be absolutely vital in getting initial participation. It is clear that the history of the coach’s interaction in the community was a critical asset.

The city of Riverton is located in southeastern Montana situated on the banks of a large river. The city is the government center of the county with education, health, and social services making-up the other major economic drivers in the area. Riverton started as a railroad town when the Northern Pacific Railroad laid tracks across the northern plains. Among the many issues facing the community, nearly 16% of housing units are vacant and 70% of individuals and 45% of households earn less than \$30,000. The community enthusiastically embraced the Horizons program and according to the local coach who also serves as the county Extension agent, “negative things had happened in the past, and the community was irritated and looking for opportunities for change. It was fairly easy to get a steering committee together. I just asked people to sign up and they showed up for an initial meeting. It was good timing.” While the steering committee was very proactive and “forward thinking” the coach admits that “I shouldn’t have done as much as I did. I did a lot of the work myself and should have delegated tasks to the steering committee. They would have been better off if I had let them work through the process more by themselves.” The coach did recognize the importance of allowing the community to have ownership of the process and in making community decisions.

Again, trust in the competency of the coach was a factor in assembling the steering committee and getting the community to participate in the program. There was also diversity on the steering committee including an individual involved in local student groups and a local bank administrator who was very influential in the region. This added to the quality of the conversations that took place when the committee met since different stakeholders had different perspectives and interests and would add these perspectives to the discussions.

However, there was not a lot of participation from low income segments of the community even though the steering committee actively tried to recruit members. According to the coach, “we were very cognizant of reaching out to the low income members of our community and tried to be inclusive, but we were not successful.” As was true in Smelterville, survey data from program participants in Riverton support this conclusion. The coach did recognize that there is more interaction now among citizens of the community and, by all accounts, the program succeeded in terms of on-the-ground outcomes and more intangible outputs such as improved relationships, communication, and trust in the community.

Among the outcomes of the program, the community started a successful community foundation that continues to raise funds for various community projects and scholarships, an expanded food stamp outreach program, and a town clean-up

and beautification program. Perhaps most importantly, the coach states that the community is more engaged, with individuals running for office, more responsive and proactive in talking about community issues, and more people taking part in community actions. Summarizing the program, the coach claims, “this is one of the best things we have ever done.” The coach is now playing much less of a role in the initial work-related to the Horizons program. For example, members of the steering committee and other community members are taking the lead on the community foundation planning and outreach efforts and other action committees continue to meet without the coach’s involvement.

The coaches from these two examples had an extensive background in community work through Extension, albeit, not necessarily community development work in particular. Examples across the state of coaches with no community development background also resulted in favorable outcomes of community engagement and action plan implementation. It was clear that those coaches, who had developed relationships in the community through successful extension-related programs in the past, were able to implement the Horizons program with favorable outcomes. However, the community development skills and experiences of the coach were not the only critical issue for the success of the Horizons program, but rather success was also contingent on relationships and trust within the community and their experience with collaborative community development efforts in the past.

Minnesota Horizons

While Minnesota Extension worked with 29 communities in Phases II and III of Horizons, this portion of the article examines the relative success of two communities from Phase II. Home to less than 4000 residents, the city of Larkspur’s employment base has long focused on resource extraction. The long-term economic decline in the mining industry made poverty a serious problem for Larkspur. At the same time, Larkspur is in a region known for its highly charged political atmosphere and strong streak of independence. This resulted in a high degree of insularity and distrust of outsiders. In the words of the coach that worked with Larkspur, “People only consider you from here if you have multiple generations from here. [When I arrived] they viewed me as an outsider rather than a teammate.”

The politically-active nature of residents of Larkspur manifested itself in a Horizons steering group composed of residents extremely passionate about regaining prosperity for Larkspur and politically influential enough to make change a reality. According to the coach, “in some communities you have to suggest making political connections; in Larkspur it is an everyday kind of thing.” On one hand, the coalescing of these powerful individuals, many of whom had extensive experience in leadership and community development efforts, signaled that Larkspur was “ready” to work on a community development initiative. The steering committee proved to be decisive, well-organized and confident in their decision-making, resulting in rapid movement on community development initiatives.

On the other hand, it is unclear if Horizons resulted in new perspectives from Larkspur participating in the planning and implementation of community development initiatives. For example, while there is evidence of individuals who have never run for elected public offices starting campaigns at the conclusion of the Horizons program, it appears that these individuals were already part of the informal networks with significant influence on public decision-making. Initially,

participants in some of the Horizons programming in Larkspur were individuals who lived well outside of Larkspur, but were relatives of powerful community members. Thus, the dialogues about poverty and leadership training involved residents (and, in some cases, non-residents) who were already relatively powerful and privileged in Larkspur.

Despite the lack of evidence that the public decision-making process has become more open in Larkspur, the town's action plan set forth some ambitious civic engagement projects at the conclusion of Horizons that sought wider participation by residents in the civic life of Larkspur. Examples include the creation of an annual winter carnival, participation in National Night Out block parties, adopt-a-block programs, and a variety of youth programming including skateboard, ice skating, and bicycle events. By all accounts, these initiatives have proven to be remarkably successful, drawing large and diverse audiences of residents. Other programming ideas, such as programs to increase ridership on public transportation and provide funds to assist households with delinquent utility bills, had direct connections to poverty alleviation, but have not been implemented in a widespread or systematic fashion.

The experience of the coach in Larkspur clearly highlights the tension between being "of" the community rather than "outside" of the community. As an outsider to Larkspur, the coach was rarely consulted by the steering committee and usually learned about decisions the committee made regarding their activities several weeks after the fact. As the coach commented, "It was like they wanted access to the resources [from Horizons] without the oversight that came with those resources." While this indicates a high level of ownership of the Horizons program in Larkspur, the lack of communication between the coach and the steering committee did not allow the coach opportunities to push the committee to be more inclusive and involve residents from outside the existing power structure in an authentic way. At the same time, widespread participation by residents in civic programs suggests that the town may have taken steps to lay the ground work for a more inclusive future.

With a population just under 5000 people, the city of Yarrow's economic base is considerably more diverse than Larkspur's. Still, much of the economy is dominated by relatively low-paying jobs in meat processing and the service sector. Recently, a large immigrant population composed primarily of Latinos and Somalis has moved to Yarrow to take advantage of job openings in the meat processing plant. While it is certainly not limited to the immigrant population of Yarrow, poverty has been a particular problem for this group. Thus, with the mandate of Horizons to foster leadership to reduce poverty in mind, the immigrant population was an important group to include in the Horizons process in Yarrow.

Similar to Larkspur, the Horizons program in Yarrow initially had a tenuous relationship with its coach. With a background in local politics and community organizing, the coach in Yarrow immediately pressed for broad participation and a reshuffling of the power structure in Yarrow in initial meetings with the steering committee. This created friction because the steering committee did not represent a diverse set of views and was composed of relatively powerful residents. Over time, the coach figured out how to push the steering committee members in less overt ways to open the process to a more diverse set of voices. In the coach's words, "In Yarrow I had to go in and really dig around for broader engagement [so that] we could talk about poverty in a more genuine way . . . where [the steering committee] learned the most was how to engage people without being patronizing and talking about poverty in a way that everyone can hear."

The coach's efforts to broaden participation in Horizons paid off. Horizons in Yarrow experienced a surge in involvement by youth and immigrants. In fact, after realizing that the Study Circles aspect of Horizons would not attract enough Latino residents to satisfy minimum thresholds outlined by NWAFF, the steering committee and coach elected to extend their timeline for the Study Circle exercises and make a concerted effort to discover the informal leadership in the Latino community and offer bilingual trainings for facilitators. Ultimately, almost one-fifth of Study Circle participants and one-third of LeadershipPlenty[®] participants in Yarrow were Latino.

While Yarrow was relatively less insular than Larkspur, working with the community as an outsider was a challenge for the coach. When asked about the reception in Yarrow, the coach responded, "There was lots of welcoming language, like 'we're so lucky to have your help,' but there was a shallow bottom to our interactions. Like most places, Yarrow has a very complex system of social dynamics and the rules of [those dynamics] were tightly held." Learning the rules that governed social dynamics in Yarrow and establishing trust with the steering committee and other members of the community took time and certainly contributed to early missteps in community interactions on the part of the coach. At the same time, lacking a base of local knowledge in Yarrow and being treated as an outsider was not without its benefits. As the coach noted, "It was always clear that I was an outsider, so I never took [reproaches by community members] personally, but people were also more likely to be honest with me. It's like you tell a therapist or bartender all kinds of things because they don't have anything to do with [your problems]."

With a diverse set of voices involved in the Horizons process, the action plan created at the community visioning event focused on poverty alleviation and improving the lives of poor, immigrant households living in Yarrow. Specifically, the action plan called for the creation of adult ESL and financial literacy classes; a bilingual certified nursing assistant training program; a bilingual day care worker training program; the construction of bus shelters at transit and school bus stops; and publishing a resource directory that is inclusive and available to all residents. In a sign that the processes advocated by Horizons have become institutionalized in Yarrow, the action plan also called for a new round of Study Circles focused on race relations to help reduce racial tensions between Anglo and Latino residents.

Despite the lack of local knowledge and initial trouble navigating a relatively insular community, the coach in Yarrow helped the community use the Horizons program to learn how to engage a diverse set of residents, identify community problems, and build consensus around solutions to these problems. While poverty is still a pressing problem for many Yarrow residents, the community has taken steps to address the challenges that many of these residents face. Perhaps most impressive, there seems to be anecdotal evidence that the well-being of different groups of Yarrow residents are inextricably linked together.

Discussion and conclusion

Given the pervasive and, in some cases, multi-generational nature of rural poverty in Horizons communities, program participants had the difficult task of reducing poverty through leadership development. At the same time, the evidence presented in this article indicates that Horizons had the potential to profoundly affect a community's sense of identity and fundamentally change residents' willingness to

become engaged in their communities and work together to make improvements. The most widespread effects of Horizons on empowerment seem to have been at the individual level. Unambiguously, participants in Study Circles and Leadership-Plenty[®] trainings learned more about the causes and consequences of poverty as well as leadership skills that encourage collective action. Evidence presented in the case studies of this article also indicates that Horizons changed how communities conceived of leadership and approached problem-solving, but that the degree of change was uneven among communities.

We suggest that different methods of Horizons implementation adopted by states (i.e. a community versus regionally-based coach approach) may explain some of the variation in community capacity, because these implementation methods indirectly influenced the types of skills and knowledge possessed by coaches and the reception that these coaches received in the communities they served. Coaches play a significant role in the delivery of the Horizons program and were often key figures in helping community residents organize for change.

For example, in the case of Montana, coaches were not necessarily experts in leadership or community engagement but often had strong professional and personal connections with many community residents. Residents of Montana communities were quick to embrace their coaches and, as the example of Smeltonville above indicates, coaches used their established trust with community members to jump start reluctant residents and infuse energy into the process. The deep connections coaches had with communities in Montana sometimes impeded the transfer of ownership of the Horizons program. For example, in Riverton the coach was so wrapped up in the work and recognized in hindsight that efforts slowed the rate at which residents assumed the bulk of the organizing responsibilities in the Horizons work. In neither example in Montana were the coaches or steering committees able to attract many low income residents to participate in the program. However, a new cadre of leaders did come forward who had not participated previously in community planning or action.

In contrast, in Minnesota coaches typically had specific expertise in leadership development, but rarely had a wide network of personal or professional contacts in their communities. This resulted in community residents having to overcome distrust of the coach in order to fully benefit from the coach's expertise and insights. In the case of Larkspur, the distrust of the coach never dissipated and the coach did not have the opportunity to push the steering group to expand participation in the Horizons activities and embrace the model of relational leadership espoused by the NWAFF. On the other hand, in Yarrow the community did overcome this initial distrust and benefited significantly from the talents of the coach. Consequently, the steering committee learned new ways to identify informal leaders from the immigrant community and dramatically expanded participation in Horizons.

We note the characteristics of personnel involved in implementing leadership development programs, which are potentially influenced by program implementation strategies, and community context are important in determining how communities change after participating in a leadership development program. Specifically, the different experiences of coaches in Montana and Minnesota suggests that if a community change strategy uses coaching techniques, the characteristics of a coach are important. If getting a community change program off of the ground is the main challenge, it may be wise to select a coach with ample local knowledge and a well-developed social network who can encourage initial participation. One pitfall

with this approach is the potential for community involvement to stall and remain confined to individuals within established networks.

Another pitfall is increased difficulty transferring ownership of the community change process out of the hands of the coach and to a wider group that is representative of the community. Selecting a coach who will be viewed as an outsider in the community may improve the chances of wider community involvement (since this coach may have to recruit participants without relying on social networks) and a smoother transfer of ownership of the community change process to the community (since the coach will not be viewed as a community member who should participate). At the same time, it may be considerably more difficult for an outsider coach to gain the confidence of community members that is already in place for insider coaches.

Perhaps the most important finding from this research is that relatively minor investments in leadership development can yield dramatic changes in a community's capacity to identify and address problems. In many instances in Montana and Minnesota, wide swaths of community members who had either failed to recognize that poverty existed in their community or only understood poverty as an economic concept gained a deeper appreciation for the causes and consequences of poverty and ways of reducing it. Further, residents in many communities report that they now recognize the importance of community networking and new relationships and feel a renewed sense of hope and pride in their communities. Poverty still exists in Horizons communities and the vagaries of market forces and policy decisions made at other jurisdictional levels will continue to influence the depth and breadth of economic poverty in the communities. At the same time, residents of Horizons communities have developed skills and insights that will allow them to conceive of and implement initiatives that address the myriad forms of poverty.

While the Horizons program addressed poverty, it is not difficult to imagine how similar techniques (Study Circles, LeadershipPlenty[®], community visioning, and developing an action plan) could be tailored to focus on a variety of issues that affect small, rural communities. Focusing on community assets and participatory processes generates new ideas about how to frame and solve a community problem. Because the Horizon's approach is inherently relational it also enhances social capital within the community that has many positive externalities, such as increasing the community's ability to cope with current and future problems.

Note

1. Smeltonville is a pseudonym. We also provide pseudonyms for the three other communities described in this article.

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