Leadership and Civic Engagement Outcomes from Horizons:

UNDERSTANDING THE POTENTIAL FOR INCREASED CITIZENSHIP

by Paul Lachapelle

Many rural communities across the United States are faced with the challenge of addressing the complex causes and consequences related to poverty. In Montana, the challenges in many rural communities include high or fluctuating employment rates, low levels of education, limited health care options (Smith, 2008) and economic and social pressures from in- and out-migration and an increasingly aging population (Johnson, 2004; Von Reichert, 2002). Concurrent to these many issues is a decrease in civic engagement and community volunteerism across many public sectors and processes. In the last half century in particular, citizens are increasingly disengaged from the day to day business of governance and from myriad civic and social activities (Putnam, 2000). Summed up more succinctly by Kemmis (2001, pg. 56), "our way of being public is a deepening failure."

Community leadership programs have been shown to positively influence both individuals and communities with many tangible outcomes (Ayon and Lee, 2009; Hannum, Martineau, and Reinelt, 2007; Pigg, 2002; Day, 2001; Earnest, 1996). However, the influence of leadership programs to address poverty has not been adequately studied. In this paper, I evaluate the outcomes in communities participating in the Horizons Program. Specifically, I present data from surveys related to pre and post leadership trainings as well as the results from a series of focus groups. I discuss specific examples of actions that have been initiated in the communities as a result of the trainings and then conclude with a series of statements related to the implications of the program on the individuals and communities as a whole.

Leadership and Civic Engagement Programs

Programs that allow passive or active participation in community action projects can begin to build community support and capacity. However, programs must also focus on building community capacity and skills by allowing,

encouraging and teaching citizens how to sustain the program momentum over the long term. Programs must also empower citizens so that they feel a sense of responsibility and can influence the outcome. For Williams, and Matheny, (1995, pg. 62) the simple allowance of participation is not sufficient, but rather "conditions for meaningful citizenship must first be created." Leadership and civic engagement programs are now available to build community capacity, inculcate citizenship, and promote volunteerism and skill-building needed to address poverty in rural communities.

The proliferation of literature on leadership in terms of both community development theory and application is abundant and growing (see for example, Emery, Fernandez, Gutierrez-Montes, & Flora, 2007; Wituk, Ealey, Clark, Heiny, & Meissen, 2005; Pigg, 1999). Many studies have shown the ancillary benefits of citizen leadership development programs including collective social action (Pigg, 2002), social capital and trust building (Day, 2001), implementing neighborhood programs and starting community organizations (Ayon and Lee, 2009), and increasing community networking, personal self-confidence and civic responsibility (Earnest, 1996). Furthermore, greater numbers of higher education institutions are adopting leadership education programs (Fredricks, 1998). More specifically, there is evidence that land grant universities can play a significant role in leadership and community change processes (Stephenson, 2011). Based on these studies, the notion of applying leadership development and civic engagement processes and skill building in communities has the potential to address poverty.

Horizons and the Relationship to Citizen Leadership Development

The Horizons Program, administered through Montana State University, is an attempt to build leadership capacity and hence address issues related to poverty in 35 rural communities across the state. The rationale is to build leadership and

civic engagement skills of community members with the expectation or anticipation that new or refined leadership skills would translate to poverty reduction through increases in empathy, action and evaluation related to poverty eradication. The Horizons Program took place in multiple phases. Twenty communities participated in the first two phases between 2004 and 2008 and an additional 15 participated in phase three between 2008 and 2010. The first 20 communities were recognized as alumni communities during the third phase.

Communities must meet thresholds for each segment within defined time frames before they can move forward. Each threshold is connected to skills and achievements that help strengthen a community. All Horizons communities get the same resources and tools. Community coaches, many of whom also serve as MSU Extension educators, work with local steering committees to select additional resources customized to meet local needs. For one community, it might mean economic development training; for another, conflict resolution counseling or technical skill courses.

The Horizons Program is organized into various segments to bring the community together and build community capacity. One of the primary objectives of the program is to enhance leadership and civic engagement through dialogue and action. The Study Circles segment specifically engages community members in conversation and subsequent actions related to projects that require a collaborative and shared effort to design and implement. Next, the LeadershipPlenty segment allows participants to explore their own personal leadership qualities and define community assets so that individuals and group resources can be pooled and used collectively to address poverty. The Study Circle and leadership development trainings were open to all community members free of charge. Several community members (often the coach and members of the steering committee) were selected to serve as the leadership training facilitator. A three-day training session was organized to help all facilitators become familiar with the leadership development materials and well-versed in facilitation technique. For the leadership training, nine different topical areas were covered over 36 hours of meeting time (most communities held one to two-hour leadership sessions over the duration of many months). The topics covered included conflict management, identifying individual and group leadership assets, communication techniques, strategic planning, and visioning. A formal Community Visioning and Action Planning segment followed the community conversations and leadership trainings.

Methods

The data presented below was collected from a variety of sources including from the author and from Morehouse (2010). Pre and post Horizons surveys focused on the impact of the leadership trainings for a number of key individual and community variables such as ability to lead and the recognition of leadership in others. Results below show data from respondents who participated in phase three Horizons communities. These individuals were asked to rate their understanding or opinions of the leadership trainings and related activities both before and after the training took place. Every effort was made to sample every participant of the program, however, some communities experienced attrition of participants due to time or other constraints.

Additional sampling of alumni communities took place to understand changes in leadership as a result of the Horizons Program using paper and on-line surveys and focus groups. These alumni community surveys were not random but rather purposive in that key contact persons were identified. These individuals were then invited to recruit five additional individuals to complete a survey and participate in a focus group. Individuals were sought with a thorough knowledge of the community and the influence of the Horizons Program on individuals, the community and the region. In particular, two Horizons Steering Committee members, one participant acknowledged to be a community leader, one elected official knowledgeable about Horizons and, if possible, one key media contact were sought out for the survey and focus groups. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A content analysis was performed to determine key points and themes shared amongst many or all of the focus group participants.

Results and Discussion

Responses from individuals before and after leadership trainings were collected from participants in all of the communities. Figure 1 (below) presents the responses for
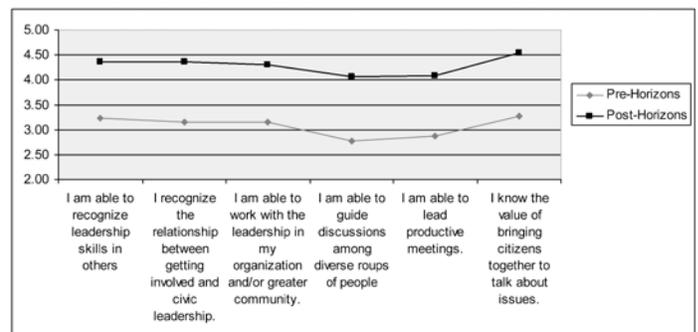

FIGURE 1. *Pre and post survey responses to changes from leadership training (n=227)*

questions related to perceived changes in leadership qualities and civic engagement for individuals and the community as a whole in the 15 phase two Horizons communities.

The responses for six of the survey items show a clear and positive change. The perceived changes are related to a variety of variables associated with leadership

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not sure (%)
New people working on community issues	85	9	5
Increase in people in leadership roles	80	15	5
Decisions involve more people	78	9	13
Leadership more diverse	60	20	20
Civic engagement increased	51	27	24
More people joined local groups	47	18	35
New people elected	39	33	28
Better able to handle conflict	38	24	38

TABLE 1. *Responses to perceived changes in leadership characteristics in Horizons Alumni communities (n=55)*

skills and civic engagement as a result of the leadership training program. Related to this pre and post survey work, respondents were also asked to gauge the types of leadership and civic engagement changes that resulted from the Horizons Program. Table 1 (left) shows the leadership changes that took place according to respondents in select alumni communities.

Table 1 shows that a majority of the respondents for most of the variables felt the Horizons program resulted in positive change regarding leadership and civic engagement. In particular, those surveyed overwhelmingly felt that the Horizons program had resulted in new people working on community issues, an increase in the number of people in leadership roles, and community decisions now involving more people.

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 the communities in Phase 2 communities with descriptions of the outcome listed in the right column.

Outcome	Description
Establishment of a Community Foundation	• Community foundation created to provide funds for needed projects/efforts • Expanded scholarship opportunities
Housing Rehab / Affordable Housing	• Secured housing rehab grants • Completed a housing study • Committees formed to coordinate 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	• Development of a Head Start Program, after-school program and youth mentoring programs • Town hall meetings organized on underage drinking • Offering youth financial literacy classes
Education	• Offering adult basic skills development classes • Educational classes for the family
Addressing Basic / Urgent Needs	• Created community food bank in a handicapped-accessible building • Created community garden to help those who need food • Revamping thrift shop
Community Clean-Ups	• Community clean-up committee formed • Community beautification contest organized

TABLE 2. *Significant outcomes and brief descriptions as a result of the community visioning process*

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

The focus group data also revealed several key outcomes related to leadership and civic engagement. Most participants of the focus groups commented on the significant changes that took place in each community as a result of the leadership trainings. In particular, participants felt that the leadership trainings brought community members together and began to build positive relationships and established trust between diverse groups of individuals. Many commented that leadership training was the basis for a community to reflect on its past, understand current trends, and begin to craft a vision of the future. Identifying leaders in the community was seen as integral to crafting a vision and implementing necessary actions to realize community goals and objectives. The opportunity for discussion and interaction helped community members construct both a new vision for the community as well as new roles for themselves in that process.

While there were many examples by respondents on the importance of leadership development in the community related to the Horizons Program, the following quote provides evidence relating leadership to the team work necessary to address poverty.

It's unrealistic for a town to hit the lottery and to expect someone to come in and fix all your problems. Really, the way to become a wealthier community is to take some pride in ourselves and I think the leadership program does help build that confidence. It encourages team work. We have definitely seen some new leadership, different people, through the program. One person, she's now involved and she will tell you "I didn't have the confidence and didn't feel part of the community." Well, now she's very much part of the community.

Leadership training was also reported to influence the willingness of a new cadre of individuals to run for office.

In several communities, new local officials were elected and they were participants in the leadership trainings. One person that was elected was a write-in candidate. And, he said "they were talking about leadership and I wanted to see if I could be one." He stepped up because he saw a need for leadership. It's really an enduring impact here, in our community.

Many respondents also recognized that leadership training was fundamental to any type of community change effort as exemplified by the following comment.

I think that leadership training and awareness is the basis for all of the improvements made and any strategies implemented. Offering leadership training was really the most important aspect.

This last example specifically mentions ownership over the process and outcome and the shared control by the many individuals who become empowered through the process.

Community pride and the idea of empowering individuals regardless of their income level, to feel like they can participate, was probably a big goal of ours. That no matter what your income level there's a way that you can contribute and be a part of the process. … you have to allow the community a certain amount of ownership to be able to pick the outcomes that they want to work on. … I mean you almost lose control over that a little bit because it's a community process. We're empowering the community to pick the things that they would think are important…If any of us is going to succeed, the community really has to have ownership in that. And, those things that they took ownership in may or may not have had real direct measurable results.

The excerpts above signify the support, involvement, and commitment of respondents. Many respondents discussed the importance and sense of ownership that seemed to result from the Horizons Program and that in turn influenced the overall quality of interested or affected parties to be involved in the community development proposal, plan, strategy or decision. Indeed, it appears from the comments above, that empowering members of the community in community planning and development efforts has been promulgated on developing and acquiring "buy-in" in large part through leadership training and civic engagement processes.

Implications and Conclusions

Based on the data above, clearly, the Horizons Program has had a discernable influence on both individuals and the community as a whole. Not only did individuals report positive changes in their own leadership abilities, but also on the tangible outcomes that resulted from the community visioning and action planning processes. As the data illustrate, there were clear and observable changes in terms of leadership skills and civic engagement that translated to on-the-ground outcomes and results that have both directly and indirectly influenced poverty in the communities.

The implications for these changes are more diffuse and difficult to predict, particularly in the long-term. However, given the relative significance of the reported changes and related projects, it would appear that community capacity to address adversity, such as poverty, would remain viable given the investment and changes that have taken place. Indeed, building community capacity through leadership trainings and civic engagement has produced not only tangible results in terms of community development-related projects, but also intangible outcomes in terms of individual capacity to trust others in the community, to implement programs and network, and increase a sense of self-confidence and civic responsibility.

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