



---

## Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Leadership development in rural communities

By CED Guest Author

Article: <https://ced.sog.unc.edu/leadership-development-in-rural-communities/>

This entry was posted on March 10, 2010 and is filed under Community Development, Human & Cultural Assets, Report On Asset-Building Strategies, Social & Civic Assets

---

*Lisa Stifler is a Research Associate with the Community and Economic Development Program.*

Many communities in rural North Carolina and rural communities throughout the country have been facing a unique paradox in recent years – on the one hand, many areas have seen an increase in population due to retirees moving into the communities, but on the other hand, they have also lost significant numbers of youth and young adults. The loss of youth and young adults, often called the “brain drain,” is not all that new in rural communities. Because of the actual and perceived lack of opportunities in rural communities, youth and young adults leave for education, jobs, and other reasons, sometimes urged to do so by their own communities. However, the lack of the younger generation hampers a rural community’s ability to survive and recover from economic downturns, engage in community and economic development, and remain competitive in an ever-changing global environment. Developing ways to involve community members who are not the “usual suspects” (youth, young adults, women, minorities, low-income residents, and even the new retirees) and including them in decision-making roles and processes is necessary for rural North Carolina communities to remain relevant, survive recessions, and thrive. While leadership development and human capital building work may seem “soft” and less important to community and economic development work than other efforts, no community or economic development initiative or plan will be successful or will continue without a constant source of strong and devoted leaders. The following three programs are examples of rural leadership development programs that tap into groups of community residents who may not typically be considered for leadership roles.

Throughout the Northwest, rural communities in Minnesota, Iowa, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oregon, and Washington have or are currently participating in a leadership development series focused on cultivating the leadership capacity of low-income rural residents. Called Horizons, the program is a partnership between the Northwest Area Foundation and Cooperative Extension offices in each state, and its goal is to expand grassroots leadership to reduce poverty and grow community prosperity. Northwest Area Foundation funds the program, while the extension services deliver the educational and support programming in each state. In order to participate, communities must have changing demographics, high poverty rates, and populations less than 5,000. In addition, communities interested in participating must show sufficient interest among youth and adults in becoming involved in the process. The entire program lasts 2-3 years, with five major components stretched throughout that time period: 1) one-day workshops introducing the program to community members; 2) study circles which help to start community dialogues around the issues in the community and steps to take to address the issues; 3) LeadershipPlenty®, a leadership development program developed by the Pew Partnership for Civic Engagement; 4) community visioning with at least 15% of the community through surveys and meetings; and 5) community coaching and action through work with the state cooperative extensive coaches. Since 2003, more than 300 communities throughout the Northwest have participated in the Horizons program, with communities developing strategic plans, pursuing economic development, starting nonprofit organizations and community foundations, starting farmer’s markets for local farmers, developing youth and education programming, investing in local entrepreneurs and businesses, and embarking on numerous other community and economic development activities aimed at reducing poverty and increasing community prosperity.

In Nebraska, three organizations (the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, the Nebraska Community Foundation, and the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship) have partnered to focus on four tactics of rural development under the umbrella of what they call the HomeTown Competitiveness approach, which is described as a “come back/give back approach to rural community building.” The four tactics included in this approach are: 1) building local leadership; 2) expanding community philanthropy; 3) engaging youth and young people; and 4) energizing entrepreneurship. The three partner organizations work with interested rural Nebraska communities around developing activities and action steps around the four tactic areas. In terms of building leadership, the HTC model places a strong emphasis on the need for



---

continuous leadership training programs, particularly ones that develop leaders among youth, women, and minorities, and to this end, the Heartland Center provides leadership training and development services based on individual community needs. The engaging youth component of the HTC model includes involving youth in community leadership, providing community support for youth, and providing entrepreneurship education and career development services for youth in the community. In addition, the HTC partners work with community adults on changing the attitudes, behaviors, and conversations adults are having with the youth in the community so that the youth can begin to perceive their hometown as offering opportunities and support for them, increase their engagement in the community, and become more interested in returning home after pursuing education or career opportunities elsewhere. A case study of one of the first HTC communities can be found [here](#).

Finally, in rural Southwest Minnesota, the YES! (Youth Energy Summit) program is a youth involvement and leadership program that focuses on renewable energy and sustainability issues. Administered by the Southwest Initiative Foundation, and coordinated through partnerships with Prairie Woods Environmental Learning Center and Prairie Ecology Bus Center, the program works with community and school-based teams of teenagers (grades 8 through 12) to develop networks, knowledge, and leadership skills through hands-on, experiential learning and energy-related action projects. The projects are focused on the teams' schools, communities, organizations, and the region. In addition to working together as teams, the youth come together twice in the school year to meet with other teens involved in the project, hold competitions, and attend workshops on career and leadership possibilities in the region. Through the team coaches and partner facilitators, the teens become engaged in the community by interacting with local government, school, community, and business leaders in developing and implementing their year-long energy projects. In fact, each project must include community support and/or involvement. In this way, area youth are introduced to leadership and career opportunities in their communities with an eye towards becoming the new and future leaders of the communities.

The overarching theme of the three programs highlighted are that not only are the programs aimed at developing leaders among groups not typically tapped into for leadership roles, but they do so by not simply informing residents of the leadership opportunities in their communities. The programs actively involve individuals through hands-on work that is focused on creating change in a community. In this way, the programs develop new leaders with the capacity and commitment to help their rural communities survive and thrive.