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Missouri-Illinois Step-Up to Leadership Program Impact Evaluation

Poverty and Rural Communities

- Number of those living in poverty in rural areas within the US increased from 8.0 million in 2011 to 8.5 million (17.8% poverty rate) in 2012.
- This widened the gap between rural and urban poverty rates, from 2.4 to 3.2 percentage points during the same period (USDA-ERS, 2014a).
- In 2013, the poverty rate for children under 18 years was 19.9%, for those aged 18 to 64 years was 13.6%, while the rate for those aged 65 and older stood at 9.5% (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014).
- Of 703 high-poverty counties (with a poverty rate of 20 percent or higher) in the United States during 2007-11, 571 were rural.

Need for Targeted Community Development Programs

- Community leadership development holds promise in creating equitable communities¹
- Low-income participants experience more difficulty bridging leadership skills into community engagement²
- Few leadership development programs with low-income community members offer grants to close the gap



Step-Up to Leadership

- 12-week course tailored toward community members with low-income
- Created by MU Extension in collaboration with Community Action Agency of St. Louis County to address low participation on boards
- Initial goal was to empower participants with the skills that they needed to actively serve on boards
- Pilot study (2012) observed increased self-confidence and self-worth and recognition that they are valued and have a role in the community³

Curriculum

- Sessions:
 - Come as you are
 - Planning for your passion
 - Understanding and embracing diversity
 - Board legality skills
 - Speak up, speak out
 - Funding the Way
 - Stepping out (Graduation)

Study Objectives

- To evaluate the impact of the Step-Up to Leadership program in a bi-state area
- To gather information to inform further curriculum development

Methods

- Participant recruitment
 - Missouri: 6 Community Action Agencies (2 urban and 4 rural)
 - Illinois: 1 State Extension office (rural)
- Semi-structured interviews
- Surveys (pencil/paper) with 80 program graduates

Description of Interview Participants

	Women	Men	Total
Graduates	44	11	55
Facilitators	13	6	19
Community members	11	1	12
<i>Total</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>86</i>

Description of Graduates (Survey participants*)

- Mean age = 47 years old
- Length of residence in community > 5 yrs
- Mean household size = 2.9 people
- Race/Ethnicity: White (68.8%) Black(26.2%) AI/AN (2.5%) Other (2.52%)
- Employment:
 - 31% Full-time
 - 10% Part-time
 - 3.8% Self-employed
 - 7.5% Looking for work

** Includes 25 who did not participate in interviews*

Analysis

- Interview data
 - Audio recordings transcribed by a professional transcriber
 - Coding conducted by team using NVivo 10 software
 - Data categorizing strategy
 - Thematic Analysis
 - Memoing
- Survey data: SPSS

Main findings

1. Expected findings: SUL graduates are more confident, displayed better interpersonal skills, and were more engaged in their communities
2. Impact of mini-grant process
3. Curriculum skills had secondary impact on family relationships
4. Importance of continued support post-graduation

1. "Expected" Findings

Item	Before SUL M (SD)	After SUL M (SD)
I am understanding and patient when working with others	2.10 (.66)	1.38 (.49)
I try to strengthen personal relationships with others	2.14 (.64)	1.30 (.46)
I am confident of my ability to work with others to solve my community problems.	2.30 (.76)	1.35 (.51)
I try to learn more about the people I interact with	2.26 (.75)	1.35 (.48)
I try to make connections and strengthen personal and professional bonds among members of my community	2.51 (.76)	1.43 (.58)
I consider myself to be well qualified to participate in public issues	2.45 (.79)	1.44 (.50)
I know the steps needed to obtain diverse support for activities in my community	2.75 (.71)	1.75 (.89)
I am a leadership role model for others in my community	2.53 (.86)	1.61 (.70)

Scale: 1=Strongly agree, 4= Strongly disagree; t-tests all statistically significant, p<.001

2. Impact of Mini-Grant Process

- Participants identify their passion in their community
- Participants can apply for up to \$500 from the Community Action Agency at the end of the course for value-adding community activities
- Projects must add value to the lives of people living in poverty in their community

Results – Mini Grant as a Skill

- Opportunity to apply for a mini-grant was motivating factor to join the course
 “[O]ne of the main things that he said is [we would] be learning how to do grants, and that clicked right away with me because I know that our church is in need of [funding]. That’s how he captured me to get into it.”
 (Graduate, CAASTLC 3)
- Graduates have taken grant writing skills from the program and have applied for other grants in their community
 “The grant writing program helped and that’s something I’ll be able to carry with me.”
 (Graduate, EMAA 5)

Results – Mini Grant as Capacity

- Graduates discussed how mini-grants allowed them to address needs in their communities
 “Our group applied for a farmer’s market grant. My husband and I worked on a group to start this farmer’s market that they had tried to get here for 15 years. We were in groups at this Step Up to Leadership, and our group decided to apply for the \$500 grant for the Farmers Market, and we won it. I was tickled to death.” (Graduate, MOCA 3)

Results – Mini Grant as Capacity

- Mini-grant allows skillset to be put into action
 "I think the mini grant is really an important aspect of the whole curriculum because otherwise you get everybody all geared up to do all these things and then if they don't have the resources to do it, it just kind of falls flat for them." (Facilitator, CAATLC 22)
- Skills and connection to resources turn into sustained community engagement for graduates

Previously Funded Projects

Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fence for playground at homeless shelter • Socks in back to school backpacks • Handicapped swings in local park • Child theatre and literacy program for inner city children • Car seats for low-income mothers
Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency overnights backpacks for homeless youth • Community movie night at church in rural community center • Computer room and tutoring service for inner city youth • Youth basketball camp/league
Individual/Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource room in homeless shelter • Utility support fund for families in need • Back to school fair
Hunger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Garden • Community Garden with handicap accessible beds • Food pantry infrastructure and supplemental food support • Community food drive
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County-wide wellness fair • Farmers' Market Infrastructure • Personal products and purses for victims of domestic violence

3. Impact on Family Relationships

- Although not a primary focus of the study, a strong theme emerged from the data indicating the positive effect of curriculum content on graduates' family lives

Results – Improved marital relationships

- My husband, when he gets mad he has a mouth on him and he will cut you down, and that's the way his father was with him so it just automatically comes out. And since these classes I've made him realize I don't deserve that. It made him stop and think...(Now) I'm able to stop him sometimes right in the middle of it and let him know. Before *(participating in the program)* I just shut down, ignored him, kind of just blocked him out even though he kept going on and on. I feel better about myself that I can let him know it is okay for him to be mad at me but he doesn't need to cut me down the way he was (Program graduate, CSI 11).

Results – Improved Household Management

- Well, because of that *(SUL)* I have found myself making more of a plan day by day just on daily routines.... I'm a single parent with two kids and I have found that when I do that it's so much easier with the girls and with getting things done...it is cool because now they are learning to be organized. *(when I bought my house)*, I had to budget and do all this stuff with the credit report...so with some of the techniques, the information I gathered from the class helped me. (Program graduate, CSI 12)

4. Importance of Continued Support Post-Graduation

- Program graduates differed in their capacity to independently exhibit leadership skills
- Continued support after graduation was expressed as a need (or valued by those who had it)

Results – “how do I connect to opportunities?”

“It depends on what you have going on in the area where you live. If you stay in a dead area and you don’t have a lot of participation or you don’t have a lot of things going on then there will be no opportunities. But for a person who don’t mind going down to city hall and tell them “Look, we need to do something about this or do something about that,” yeah, I think you will find opportunities.”

– Program Graduate, CAASTLC 12.

Results – Programs need to help complete the bridge

“So in one way, yes (there are opportunities). In another way, to have someone who’s come through and may not have very many bridges or very much access in any other area of their life to this kind of formal way of functioning in the world there’s not the systemic support that’s needed. That’s something that is missing on a community level that the community should be responsible for and not the individual.”

Program Facilitator, CMCA 1



Conclusions

- SUL provided opportunities to develop important skills they used to positively impact their communities – many of these were sustained efforts.
- In addition to intended consequences, SUL had positive unintended effects on participants’ lives
- There are opportunities for sponsoring agencies to play an important role, even after participants graduate from SUL



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