

## **Rural Leadership Development: A Synthesis of Research**

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### **Abstract**

With millions of dollars being invested in adult rural leadership development, it is essential that research be conducted to determine the effectiveness of this investment. Such research can validate the investment and provide guidance for future programming. However, an extensive review of literature in Cambridge Scientific Abstracts yielded only 15 relevant research articles over a decade of publication. Among these articles, sub-topic areas identified included Partnerships, Political Shifts, Safety & Health, Gender Equity, Public Discourse, Statewide Program Impact, and Continuing Education. All of these areas lacked adequate saturation of research. The effectiveness of rural leadership development is severely threatened by this lack of published research. With increasingly limited resources, those engaged in rural leadership development programming must address significant deficiencies in the research and share findings for the betterment of all.

### **Introduction**

There are about 40 agricultural leadership programs in existence today that associate themselves with the model promoted by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in the early 1970s. By the year 2000, these programs had graduated over 7,200 leaders and received over \$15 million in financial support (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2001). These figures can be multiplied further when considering

other adult rural leadership programs that are not associated with the Kellogg model. Although the support for such programs has been generous in the past, financial sponsors are now asking practitioners to provide evidence of the return on investment

Return on investment for leadership development programs is being demonstrated in some of the business leadership literature (see Phillips, 1997). However, those involved in grassroots leadership development know that community leaders do not always fit the business leader mold (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2000). Unfortunately, programming for these non-traditional leaders often involves “vague and competing definitions of leadership development coupled with lack of clear policy” (Paxson, Howell, Michael, & Wong, 1993). This lack of consensus has allowed critics of leadership programs to argue that little thought is put into program outcomes (Hustedde & Woodward, 1996). As a result, leadership programs have increasingly been put on the defense.

One way for practitioners to respond to their critics and ensure future investment is to refer to supporting literature and research. USDA’s Rural Information Center published a quick bibliography on the topic of “leadership development” and another on “rural leadership,” both for the years 1984 to 1994. However, a similar compilation of research on these topics since 1994 is not available. A compilation of recent research on rural leadership development programming is needed as program planners face new challenges and as new programs emerge.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The major purpose of this investigation was to examine the subject matter topics researched in adult rural leadership development over a ten year period. Specific objectives of the study were to:

1. categorize subject matter topics researched in adult rural leadership development over a ten year period (1994-2004), and
2. identify areas of deficiency in research related to adult rural leadership development.

### **Procedures**

The primary source used to examine research in adult rural leadership development was Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (CSA). Within CSA, three specific databases were searched: AGRICOLA, Conference Papers Index, and Sociological Abstracts. These databases were examined to ensure that they would include articles from common rural leadership related sources, including: Journal

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of Agricultural Education (JAE), Journal of Extension (JOE), Journal of Southern Rural Sociological Society, Journal of the Community Development Society, and Rural Sociology. These journals were identified as essential sources for inclusion in the search due to their reference in the Rural Information Center's Quick Bibliography Series on Leadership Development (John, 1994a) and Rural Leadership Development (John, 1994b).

Search results in CSA were limited to the date range of 1994-2004. (At the time of the study, most journals published in 2005 were not yet indexed in the CSA databases.) Using the CSA advanced search feature, options were selected for "Journal Articles Only" and "English Only." After selecting the databases for AGRICOLA, Conference Papers Index, and Sociological Abstracts, the following criteria for key words were searched "Anywhere" in the CSA indexed publications:

	Rural	-or-	Agriculture	-or-	Agricultural
-and-	Leader	-or-	Leadership	-or-	Leaders
-and-	Program	-or-	Curriculum	-or-	Institute

The initial search criteria used with the CSA database yielded over 200 publications. However, upon analyzing the abstracts and descriptors for each publication, a majority of the publications were purged from the list because they had no apparent relevance to research specific to adult rural leadership development. A refined list of 47 publications resulted from this purging process, and those publications were identified for further review. After an extensive search process among libraries at the University of Florida and its cooperating institutions, six articles were dropped from the list after all possible sources were exhausted. The remaining 41 articles were fully analyzed for their connection to the topic of adult rural leadership development.

A second source that was searched for research articles related to the topic of adult rural leadership development was the Journal of Leadership Education (JOLE). JOLE was first published in Summer 2002. Since JOLE has not been indexed in any CSA databases, the journal was manually searched using the journal archives, published at <http://www.fhsu.edu/jole/>.

Once the articles were reviewed, the reference lists of the selected articles were examined to identify any related articles were missed in the initial search. During this quality assurance process, several additional articles were reviewed, but only one article was added to the findings reported in this study.

## Findings

From search procedures outlined for this study, a total of 15 research articles, across 10 different publications, were identified as being related to the topic of adult rural leadership development (Table 1). These articles, published during the year 1994 through 2004, fall into seven sub-theme areas, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 1. *Adult Rural Leadership Development Articles Categorized By Publication and Year, 1994-2004*

Publication	'94	'95	'96	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	Total
American												
Journal of Alternative Agriculture	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Canadian												
Review of Sociology and Anthropology	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Indian Journal of Social Work	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Journal of Agromedicine	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Journal of Extension	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Journal of Leadership Education	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2
Journal of Modern African Studies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Journal of the Community Development Society	-	1	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	4
National Civic Review	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Rural Society	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Total	0	1	2	2	2	1	1	0	1	3	2	15

Table 2. *Adult Rural Leadership Development Articles Categorized By Sub-Theme and Year, 1994-2004*

Sub-Theme	'94	'95	'96	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	Total
Continuing Education	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Gender Equity	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	2
Partnerships	-	1	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	-	1	5
Political Shifts	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	3
Public Discourse	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Safety & Health	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Statewide Program Impact	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total	0	1	2	2	2	1	1	0	1	3	2	15

From the articles found to be related to adult rural leadership development, one was categorized in the sub-theme area of **continuing education**. The article, entitled "Continuing education needs of program alumni" (Fritz, Williams, & Barbuto Jr., 2003), was published in the *Journal of Leadership Education* and focuses on a study of three groups of leadership program alumni in Nebraska. The authors concluded that respondents were "most interested in training on: engaging others in a common vision, inspiring others, attracting the right people for the task, and influencing others" (p. 3). In addition, they found that face-to-face delivery was the format most preferred by respondents. The authors recommended that a similar study be performed with community leaders who have not yet participated in formal leadership training.

In the sub-theme area of **gender equity**, two articles were published in 2003, one in *The Indian Journal of Social Work* (Boraian, 2003) and the other in *Rural Society* (Pini, 2003). The article by Boraian, entitled "Empowerment of rural women: Towards reversal of gender relations," focuses on the impact of self-help groups in rural South India states. The study suggests that "women's groups have succeeded in reversing the gender relations in their favour and proved that they can effectively replace the leadership in local institutions and provide better governance to the community" (p. 521). The article by Pini, entitled "Sheep, shadows and silly saints: Constructing women in agricultural leadership," is a

review of Australian literature on the subject of “farm women’s leadership” and a discussion of its impacts. The author suggests that “the dominant representation of women in agricultural leadership in the literature is one that presents women as being interested in different spheres of leadership and as having different skills for leadership” (p. 193). She goes on to say that “a discourse of difference offers little in terms of addressing unequal power relations in the agricultural sector” (p. 193).

**Safety and health** was identified as a sub-theme for two articles published in the same 1998 issue of the *Journal of Agromedicine*. Harper and Poling’s (1998) article focused on “The South Carolina Farm Leaders for Agricultural Safety and Health Educational program.” The identified goal of the project was “to improve the safety and health of farmers, farm family members, and farm workers based on local community involvement and leadership” (p. 9). Petrea and Aherin (1998) approached the topic with a similar article, “Evaluation of findings of an agricultural health and safety community leadership development process.” The focus of their study was on a University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service project that sought to “increase citizen involvement and participation toward rural and agricultural safety and health issues” (p. 77).

**Partnerships** is the sub-theme area in which most of the articles included in this review can be categorized. A total of five articles were published in this area – three in the *Journal of the Community Development Society* (Moen, 1995; Reybold & Herren, 1999; Tabb & Montesi, 2000), one in the *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture* (Campbell, 1997), and one in the *Journal of Leadership Education* (Bolton, 2004). The article by Moen (1995), “Integrating theory and practice: Leadership and community development in the Dakotas,” highlights a model to enhance community and economic development. The Dakota Model, studied from six-member teams in 32 rural communities, was found to facilitate “empowering, collaborative network development” (p. 93). Campbell (1997), in his article entitled “Community controlled economic development as a strategic vision for the sustainable agriculture movement,” also focused on grassroots organizing. His evaluation of networks promoted by the California Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture (CASA) encourages a vision of “community-controlled economic development” (p. 37). Reybold and Herren (1999) looked at community development practices further in their article, “Education and action in Magnolia community: Rethinking community development.” The study of Magnolia, a community in rural Georgia, looked at blending traditional and participatory models of community development in a way that meets both the needs of the funding agency and the community members. “A model for long-term leadership development among groups of diverse persons: The Delta Emerging Leaders program” was presented by Tabb and Montesi (2000). The program that they

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studied brought together diverse racial groups in an effort to “help build local and regional partnerships for creating and managing change in diverse communities” (p. 331). Bolton’s article, entitled “Perceptions of leadership skills as an indicator of a community’s social capital,” highlighted the lack of cooperation among leaders Cooperative Extension Service and Workforce Development Boards. She proposed increased interaction between these two groups when working on local and regional projects and programs.

Three articles were found to be related to the sub-theme of **political shifts**, one published in *National Civic Review* (Duhl, 1997), one in *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* (Veltmeyer & Petras, 2002), and the third in the *Journal of Modern African Studies* (Williams, 2004). Duhl’s (1997) article, entitled “Leadership in American communities,” discusses a shift in American politics “from the large P politics of state and national elections, to the small p politics of local and regional communities” (p. 75). Duhl suggests that the new leaders in politics are local people responding to personal threats. In “The social dynamics of Brazil’s Rural Landless Workers’ Movement: Ten hypotheses on successful leadership,” Veltmeyer and Petras (2002) focus on the peasant-based movements that are dominating social change in Latin America. The grassroots leaders studied were found to be well-educated, yet loyal to their rural roots. In Williams’ article “Leading from behind: Democratic consolidation and the chieftaincy in South Africa,” he cites the continued role of hereditary chiefs in South African communities despite the incorporation of democratic elections. The study found that many chiefs have been successful in recasting themselves as “authentic representatives” of local communities, thus allowing chieftaincy and democratic elections to coexist.

Hustedde (1996) authored the only article categorized in the **public discourse** sub-theme area. His article, “An evaluation of the National Issues Forum methodology for stimulating deliberation in rural Kentucky,” was published in the *Journal of the Community Development Society* and focused on deliberation techniques used in community development and citizen capacity-building. The study looked at “lessons learned about deliberative public discourse through the Appalachian Civic Leadership Project” (p. 198).

**Statewide program impact** was the final sub-theme identified among the articles collected for this review of literature. Dhanakumar, Rossing, and Campbell (1996) published “An evaluation of the Wisconsin Rural Leaders Perspective Program” in the *Journal of Extension*. Their study investigated the key outcomes for participants involved in the Wisconsin Rural Leaders Perspective Program. The authors found that leadership development, particularly in the areas of

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communication skills and networking, can enhance participation in civic and community development projects. In addition, their study suggested that “rural leaders learn best by a process of action and reflection.”

Eleven additional articles were identified as nearly related to the topic, but they were not included because they appeared to focus more on encouraging participation of rural citizens than developing rural leaders. Such articles typically discussed *involving* rural leaders in a project or program, but they had few comments about *developing* rural leaders. Articles excluded for this reason include those by: Akhter, 2002; Bhatanager, 2002; Bruckmeier, 2000; Datta, 2003; Feinberg, Greenberg, & Osgood, 2004; Grudens-Schuck, 2001; Hayward, Simpson, & Wood, 2004; Kalamasz, 2003; Perez, 2000; Ramos & Delgado, 2003; and Ray, 2000.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This review of literature highlights a significant lack of publicized research on adult rural leadership development. Certainly there are organizations engaging in adult rural leadership development, but they are unable to benefit from the lessons each is learning along the way because research is not being published. In some situations, no formal research appears to be taking place, in which case the leadership development process risks going stagnant. In other situations, individual organizations and institutions are performing evaluations and other research, yet they are not taking the steps necessary to publish and share their valuable results. In either circumstance, the overall quality of adult rural leadership development is significantly inhibited by the lack of quality research. Institutions must be challenged to perform and provide the rigorous research necessary to ensure that rural leadership development programs are based on proven methods and principles.

The study’s findings suggest the following recommendations:

1. More research be focused on adult rural leadership development,
2. Researchers investigating adult rural leadership development be encouraged to submit findings for publication in peer-reviewed journals, and
3. Additional reviews of literature be performed to identify other areas of research deficiency.

With millions of dollars being invested in adult rural leadership development, as has been reported by the Kellogg Foundation (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2001), it is essential that research be conducted to determine the effectiveness of this

investment. Some related research has been conducted, including Rohs' (2004) report of the return on investment for the Southern Extension Leadership Development program. However, Rohs's research, and other similar research, does not specifically target adult rural leadership development, which brings its own unique approach to leadership development. More research support is needed.

Despite the apparent lack of published research specific to adult rural leadership development, those who work in the field probably recognize that a great deal more research is being conducted than is being reported in peer-reviewed journals. Many adult rural leadership programs perform internal evaluations but rarely take the steps necessary to publish their findings. In other situations, the research is published without the peer-review process associated with research journals. Examples of this include numerous research published by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (see <http://www.wkkf.org/Knowledgebase/Pubs/>) and research published through individual university Extension programs, such as a highly relevant article by Hustedde & Woodward (1996) published through the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. Although such publication is helpful to some, this "private" publication presents problems with widespread distribution of the research. In addition, the general academic community is often unable to determine the overall quality of such research and its transference to other situations.

As long as leadership development remains a discipline that cuts across so many different research communities, it is essential that comprehensive reviews of literature be performed and shared with others. A great deal has been reported in recent years about information overload (see Ruff, 2002, and Lyman & Varian, 2003), but what about the deficiencies that remain. Comprehensive reviews of literature allow researchers to pinpoint research deficiencies and, as a result, ensure that the research being conducted is meeting the needs of academic consumer by advancing knowledge, rather than duplicating information that is already available.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although evidence in this study suggests few studies on the topic of rural leadership development have been published in peer-reviewed outlets, readers should take caution in assuming the publications presented here are an exhaustive list. Two important limitations should be considered with respect to the scope of this literature search.

First, this study is limited by the scope of the databases that were searched. Although Cambridge Scientific Abstracts provides access to more than 100 full-text and bibliographic databases, it does not exhaust the search possibilities. Some research studies involving rural leadership development may be published in journals or other academic outlets that are not indexed within the databases included in this study. With over 37,000 scholarly journals published worldwide and that number increasing annually (Lyman & Varian, 2003), researchers must continually assess the field and keep abreast of journals of interest. Reviewers of this study have offered the following journals as possibilities for continued literature search: *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences*, *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences Education*, *Journal of High Education Outreach and Engagement*, *Journal of Public Deliberation*, and *Journal of Leadership Studies*. These journals were recommended after completion of the study and were not included within the search scope of this study. In spite of the database limitations of this study, it is notable that all of the resources identified in the USDA Rural Information Center's related quick bibliography series were included within the search scope of this study. In light of this fact, any oversight of the study may be among journals that were not in existence, or at least prominent, at the time of USDA's 1994 literature review.

A second limitation of this study is the scope of the specific search terms used. Although readers might assume publications on the topic of rural leadership development would include the terms used in this study, further expansion of the search terms might yield publications that were missed in this study. Some attempts were made in this effort (i.e. allowing "agriculture" as an alternate term for "rural"), but the argument can be made for inclusion of additional terms that were not used in this study. For example, some studies on rural leadership development may not identify the subject(s) of study as "rural" or "agricultural." Instead, the geographic focus may not be identified at all, or it may be referred to as a "small community." Indeed, the possibilities for related search terms are extensive. The terms used in this study were selected based on the researchers' perceptions of the field.

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