

The Community Leadership Educator's Perspective on Program Sustainability

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Abstract

Those who work to develop and manage community-based leadership programs have long been concerned with how to sustain them – to keep them healthy and useful. But focusing on how to sustain programs requires exploring what sustainability means. This paper reports on interviews with 41 community-based leadership education program coordinators. In contrast to their definitions of success, which emphasize impacting individuals and communities, interviewees defined program sustainability more as having enough participants, adequate funding, continuity, community support, and alumni involvement in program management. The paper explores the nuances of these definitions, including internal aspects of sustainability over which program managers had significant control, and external conditions over which they had less control. The paper also explores differences in perspectives between coordinators of programs sponsored by Chambers of Commerce and those sponsored by Cooperative Extension and universities or nonprofits.

Introduction

In these days of economic crisis, community-based programs of all kinds are focusing on survival. This is no less the case for community-based leadership education (CBLE) programs. CBLE programs provide leadership education-- usually a regular course – for members of local communities, or members of identity groups (Lersch & Burgert, 2007). As such, they emphasize improving community life. Course content can vary, but generally includes both self-understanding and community development foci. In Wisconsin, at the time of this study, there were 44 CBLE programs. Slightly less than half of those were sponsored by local Chambers of Commerce. Most of the remainder was sponsored by University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, with three others sponsored by a college, university, or a nonprofit organization.

One challenge with understanding sustainability in relation to CBLE programs is a lack of targeted literature. First, the term sustainability is increasingly used in environmental contexts as well as more colloquially in a variety of situations. Those working in an environmental context often cite a 1987 United Nations report defining sustainability as managing development in such a way that it would preserve the ability of future generations to also meet their needs (Henriques & Richardson, 2004; Liebl, 1997). Use of the term has expanded significantly since then and has come to mean simply continued existence. In an organizational context, it means that the organization continues to exist (Gordon, 2005). In its briefest sense, it is interchangeable with viability (United Nations Capital Development Fund, n.d.). Looking more specifically at sustainability in relation to community organizations, analysts see funding (Moore, 2000), and leadership cultivation and continuity (Boyatzis, Smith, & Blaize, 2006; Boaden, 2006) as the crucial foundation for sustainability.

But is that all there is to it? After an extended literature review, the authors of this paper could find little research going beyond the obvious definitions of sustainability that applied directly to CBLE programs. In public health Shediak-Rizkallah and Bone (1998) found little development of or agreement on the definition of sustainability in relation to community-based health programming. They argued that the important indicators of sustainability should be maintenance of benefits from the program, institutionalization of the program in a sponsoring organization, and increased capacity in the local community. The most important factors influencing those indicators included the broader community environment, program design and implementation features, and sponsoring organization characteristics. Savaya, Elsworth, and Rogers' (2009) literature review, again emphasizing public health, found that institutionalization and continuity have been subsequently central to the definition of program sustainability. They also found that diverse funding, organizational stability and flexibility, and

partnerships with individuals and groups in the community enhanced sustainability.

The only literature we discovered that explored sustainability in relation to any kind of leadership program found that institutional sponsor commitment, clear objectives, an evaluation plan, a long-term strategic plan, and a community capacity building focus were keys to program sustainability (Kellogg Foundation 2001). Neither this study nor the others cited above, however, engaged program managers, coordinators, and leaders in defining the terms of the research. Our research set out to discover how those involved in implementing CBLE programs defined and understood the concept of sustainability.

Methods

This research is based on a participatory study (Stoecker, 2005) designed to engage the CBLE program leaders in developing support systems for their programs. The researchers contacted coordinators of all 44 Wisconsin CBLE programs. The vast majority of programs are located in micropolitan or rural areas mostly serving a county, but sometimes focusing on a single city. Three programs are located in urban Milwaukee and Madison. Four programs serve participants across the state and five serve multi-county regions. The programs ranged from one that lasted only a year to others that were more than a decade old. One program was only two years old at the time of the study.

Our purpose was to develop a definition of sustainability that CBLE program coordinators could use in assessing their programs. This research was thus a meta-inquiry whereby the researchers learn more about the meanings and issues of the subject population in order to better design a second-stage research project (Carlson, 2003).

The researchers sent e-mail requests for interviews to coordinators of 18 Chamber of Commerce sponsored programs, 16 UW Extension administered programs, six sponsored by universities or colleges, and another sponsored by a non-profit. The requests included the interview questions (see Table 1). Two coordinators declined interviews, and two others did not respond to repeated e-mail and telephone contacts. Two people from one program were interviewed. Interviews were conducted by telephone that lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each, except in two cases where individuals returned answers via e-mail. These coordinators are responsible for an array of activities within their programs, such as acting as liaison between different program partners, fundraising, recruiting, participating in relevant boards or steering committees, and teaching some or all leadership education sessions. Thus, they could provide detailed answers to the questions. The interview questions also approached the topic of sustainability from multiple

angles to maximize the chances of getting detailed definitions from the interviewees (see Table 1).

Table 1
Interview Questions

1. What is your role in the leadership program?
2. How would you define “successful” compared to “sustainable” in relationship to community leadership development programs in general?
3. How would you know a sustainable program if you saw one? What characteristics would it have?
- 3b. How would you know an unsustainable program if you saw one? What characteristics would it have?
4. What factors do you think threaten sustainability of community leadership programs?
- 4b. What factors do you think promote sustainability of community leadership programs?

Two research team members then independently coded the answers for latent content. Coding for latent content is similar to coding for themes – interpreting what respondents say using a common thematic schema. In contrast to a-priori coding schemes, this process is similar to the original grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in that new codes are developed until all the interviews are coded and no new themes emerge. Such coding is an inter-subjective process necessitating more than one coder (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). To develop the schema, the two coders first developed their own coding schemes independently on an initial handful of interviews. They then met to discuss each of their coding schemes and create a single common coding template. Then they recoded the same interviews plus another handful of new interviews to test the template and resolve differences in application and interpretation. By the end of the process, they had discussed each code applied to each section of interview content. The researchers then counted the number of individuals for whom a code appeared in an interview. Thus, if the same code appeared numerous times in one interview, that still only counted as one appearance for the analysis you see below. The findings were then presented in draft form to all interviewees and at a gathering of CLBE program coordinators to test the salience of the themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

What are the Dimensions of Sustainability?

Separating Success and Sustainability

We first asked program coordinators how they would define success compared to sustainability for a CBLE program. The results are summarized in Table 2. We report all of the characteristics that at least four people mentioned. Five individuals did not clearly distinguish between success and sustainability and seven people perceived the concepts as intertwined.

Table 2
Coordinators' Definitions of Success versus Sustainability

Success		Sustainability	
Characteristic	Number and percent reporting	Characteristic	Number and percent reporting
Participant impact	19 (46%)	Enough participants	14 (34%)
Community impact	14 (34%)	Funding	11 (27%)
		Program continues	11 (27%)
		Graduate involvement	8 (20%)
		Enough human resources	6 (15%)
		Adaptability/growth	6 (15%)
		Responds to need	4 (10%)
		Community impact	4 (10%)
		Participant impact	4 (10%)

(total cases=41)

A number of interviewees were unaccustomed to thinking about sustainability in relation to their leadership programs. In the stress of having to maintain programs from year-to-year and even day-to-day in some cases, there is little time to reflect on the array of elements that leadership program coordinators bring together to assure program sustainability. The interview provided an opportunity for coordinators to engage in that reflection.

In defining success, there was an interesting distinction between coordinators who emphasized impact on participants and those who emphasized impact on the community. Impacting participants meant that the CBLE program “made a positive difference in participants’ personal or professional lives,” by helping them learn about themselves and their leadership skills. Impacting the community meant that the graduates engaged in projects that made a difference in their communities. The researchers were conservative in coding community impact. If an interviewee mentioned only that they wanted their graduates to serve on boards or get elected to office, it was coded as personal impact. Only when a coordinator mentioned that they wanted graduates to become involved in community projects was the response coded as community impact. About one-third of the 41 program coordinators mentioned only participant impact while one-fifth mentioned only community impact. One-tenth mentioned both.

Program coordinators’ definitions of sustainability focused mostly on the continued operation of the organization. A quarter of the respondents simply stated that, if the organization kept going, it was sustainable. Also, 11 coordinators – about a quarter of the interviewees – noted that adequate funding is an important indicator of sustainability. Other definitions, such as having enough human resources in the form of staff, volunteers, and class facilitators were also occasionally linked to funding concerns, but also to program management issues. Similarly, eight coordinators noted that having their graduates become involved in the program – recruiting future students, serving on the organization board, and bringing resources into the program – was an important sustainability indicator.

The most common criterion of sustainability, reported by 14 coordinators, was continually filling leadership classes. Many coordinators noted that filling classes meant being able to collect adequate tuition to fund the program. For others, especially in sparsely populated areas, an inability to fill classes indicated whether they had saturated the population and simply run out of potential participants.

A smaller number of coordinators defined sustainability in relation to program participant interactions with the community. For six interviewees, sustainability meant that the program could adapt and grow as conditions in the community changed. Four coordinators each understood sustainability as the extent to which community members perceived the program as responding to a community need or the community received benefits through the program.

Finally, four coordinators looked at sustainability in terms of the program’s impact on individuals. This definition, along with community impact, overlapped with the success characteristics. The success of a program thus, appears to only be a small part of what makes it sustainable. This is consistent with other literature showing that program success alone does not ensure program stability. To the

contrary, as resources collapse, a program may need to be scaled back or narrowly redefined to ensure its sustainability (Wenger, et al., 2007).

Combined Definitions of Sustainability

Over the course of each interview, program coordinators were asked to discuss sustainability in different ways. In the analysis that follows, the researchers analyzed all of an individual’s responses as a single block. Thus, a respondent who mentioned funding in answer to more than one question was still only counted once. Table 3 reports indicators mentioned by at least six program coordinators.

Table 3
Internal and External Definitions of Sustainability

Internal	Number and percent reporting	External	Number and percent reporting
Organizational stability	33 (80%)	Funding	25 (61%)
Active alumni	17 (41%)	Enough participants	24 (59%)
Program adaptability	16 (39%)	Community support network	23 (56%)
Strong leadership	10 (24%)	Meeting community needs	23 (56%)
Diversity of participants	9 (22%)	Employer support	16 (39%)
Advertising and recruitment	8 (20%)	Participant impact	12 (29%)
Evaluation / documentation	7 (17%)	Community impact	11 (27%)
		Community involvement	6 (15%)

(total cases=41)

We divided these results into internal and external factors. Internal factors are those things over which program coordinators have significant control. External factors are more heavily influenced by circumstances and conditions outside of the program. There is not a perfect separation between the two, as it is up to the organization to manage the influences of external factors, and external factors can make internal issues easier or more difficult to manage, but distinguishing those helps show the relative importance of organizational development strategies and community development strategies in achieving CBLE program sustainability.

Internal Factors

Organizational stability was the most frequently mentioned internal indicator of sustainability. This indicator combines organizational features such as a strong staff, board, program design, organizational structure and plan, and non-money resources. Organizational stability is a combined indicator because most interviewees mentioned overlapping combinations of the sub-indicators, making a separate analysis of each too difficult.

Organizational stability, however, does not prevent program adaptation and development. On the contrary, the next most cited internal indicator of sustainability was adaptability. Sixteen interviewees, more than a third, believe that continually updating and growing their programs is important. For some, this is one way to continue attracting new participants. For others, this is a way to keep up with new issues in their locale and new developments in leadership education. This focus on adaptability contrasts with the emphasis placed on long-term strategic planning in the Kellogg report (2001), perhaps because of the different scale and institutional context in which the programs operate. But the importance of evaluation, reported by seven interviewees, is consistent with that report and is important for guiding adaptability.

Involving leadership graduates or alumni in running CBLE programs was important to 17 of the 41 coordinators. These respondents wanted alumni serving as program board members, facilitating classes, or recruiting new enrollees, or funders. For most, the underlying theme was involving alumni in connecting the program to the broader community, and one-third of the program coordinators referred to this idea across several of the questions. This finding is not universal, however. While graduates may contribute in many ways to some programs, in other programs their absence is not necessarily seen as detrimental. This difference highlights that even within programs that are substantively similar sustainability can be understood and achieved differently. Some program coordinators (see Table 3) also saw active recruitment and advertising as key to maintaining participation and alumni often played an important role in this process.

Ten interviewees mentioned leadership as important to their CBLE programs. Many of the indicators above, such as adaptability or organizational stability, assume qualities of leadership. But it is nonetheless surprising how few coordinators explicitly mentioned that *leadership* was important for their own programs and even fewer had a developed theory of how leadership models played out in their programs. It is possible that some program coordinators think of leadership at the level of the individual, consistent with their program's focus, rather than at the level of the organization.

One other theme that emerges is diversity which shows the growing importance of Wisconsin's changing demographics. Diversity, as it is used by these interviewees, can take into account ethnicity, race, gender, employment, backgrounds of participants, age, or numerous other characteristics. Nine coordinators saw maintaining diversity among program participants as important to program sustainability. Coordinators saw having a diverse program as essential to ensuring its relevance to the community as a whole and enriching the learning experiences of participants.

External Factors

Looking again at Table 3, funding is the most frequently mentioned external sustainability factor discussed by 25 coordinators. This supports the central role accorded to funding in the literature. However, our analysis revealed that community connectedness which is reflected in six of the seven remaining indicators is also very important.

One aspect of community connectedness is the ability of programs to fill their classes (24 of the 41 interviewees). As noted above, this may be connected to funding, since most of the programs are dependent on tuition. But the challenge of filling classes can also be understood as the need to be connected enough in the community to convince a wide variety of potential participants and the employers that sponsor many of them of the leadership program's importance.

Thus, filling classes is intimately connected with employer support (16 of the 41 coordinators). About one-fifth of the interviewees stated that having employers sponsor their employees' participation was crucial. Others see employers as important community network members. Another way employers provide support, discussed by about a quarter of the coordinators, is by giving employees time off from work to attend leadership program sessions. Some coordinators believe that increased business pressures have reduced these forms of employer support.

Slightly over one-half of the coordinators mentioned the next aspect of community connectedness – building a community support network for their program. These networks can provide program participants, funding, trainers, and other resources. They also provide an indicator that the program is valued in the community.

The same number of interviewees mentioned the next aspect of community connectedness – meeting community needs. Most of these coordinators did not say that their programs needed to show that they met a need, but that they needed to be *perceived* as meeting a need. Here the focus is on whether community members see a leadership gap that needs to be filled than with whether they see

the CBLE program as successfully filling that need. This does not mean that program impact is unimportant, as the next two indicators show, but that it does not automatically lead to program sustainability.

The last two aspects of community connectedness are the involvement of program graduates in the community, and the overall impact of the program and its alumni on the community. Six coordinators reported that community *involvement* was important and 11 others emphasized community *impact*. Such impacts included organizations changing the way they work and incorporating the leadership program into their regular operations. As noted earlier, getting involved in the community by sitting on boards or being elected to office is different from directly creating important community changes through such involvement.

Distinct from community connectedness, 12 of the program coordinators discussed participant impact as a sustainability indicator. While some program coordinators hoped that the changes they tried to support in individuals would lead to those individuals impacting the community, most did not explicitly connect the two. Individual impact is about individual self-improvement, which is theoretically distinct from, though consistent with, directly producing a broader community impact.

Differences between Chamber-Sponsored and Other Programs

The two main sources of leadership programs in the state are county Extension offices and local Chambers of Commerce with a few programs sourced through universities or independent non-profits. Because of the potentially distinct community networks and funding of Chamber programs compared to the others, it is important to explore any potential differences in how coordinators of 18 Chamber-sponsored programs, compared to the coordinators of the 23 Extension, University and non-profit run programs, defined sustainability.

Here again the analysis is divided into internal and external aspects of the programs (see Tables 4 and 5). We are conservative in interpreting the differences since the total responses are small.

Internal Factors

As Table 4 shows, there were similarities across some of the internal factors defining sustainability for both groups. Advertising and recruitment, organizational stability, and evaluation or documentation of the program was reported in similar proportions by Chamber and non-Chamber program coordinators. In both cases, organizational stability was the most frequently cited internal factor in defining sustainability.

Table 4
Chamber vs. non-Chamber Definitions of Internal Sustainability

Internal Factors	Number and Percent of Chamber programs	Number and Percent of non-Chamber programs	Percent difference between groups
Active alumni	9 (50%)	4 (17%)	33%
Program adaptability	5 (28%)	11 (48%)	-20%
Diversity of participants	5 (28%)	3 (13%)	15%
Strong leadership	3 (17%)	7 (30%)	-13%
Evaluation/documentation	4 (22%)	3 (13%)	9%
Organisational stability	15 (83%)	18 (78%)	5%
Advertising / recruitment	4 (22%)	5 (22%)	0%
TOTAL	18	23	

The most pronounced difference between the Chamber and non-Chamber programs is the role of alumni in program sustainability. Nine of the 18 program coordinators from Chamber-run CBLE programs brought up this factor, compared to only four of the 23 leaders from non-Chamber programs. As we note in the next section, Chamber programs may be more tuition-dependent and, as three coordinators noted, alumni can become important recruiters. In particular, since a number of the Chamber programs rely on a regular stream of employer-subsidized participants, positive reports from alumni back to those sponsoring employers are important for filling classes.

There is also a difference in the reporting of program leadership as a sustainability factor. Seventeen percent of Chamber program coordinators discussed program

leadership during the interview, compared to 30% of non-Chamber programs. The bulk of the non-Chamber programs are managed through government agencies, and their coordinators emphasize community ownership of the programs. But building a community base to support the program can be more challenging for a government agency than for a business network group. Consequently, the role of strong leadership may be less visible in Chamber programs.

External Factors

Fewer coordinators emphasized external sustainability factors than internal factors. As a result, the differences here are less pronounced than for the internal indicators, with the exception of funding (see Table 5).

Table 5
Chamber vs. non-Chamber Definitions of External Sustainability

External Factors	Number and Percent of Chamber programs	Number and Percent of non-Chamber programs	Percent difference between groups
Funding	8 (44%)	17 (74%)	- 29%
Community involvement	4 (22%)	4 (9%)	13%
Community impact	6 (33%)	5 (22%)	11%
Community support network	9 (50%)	14 (61%)	-11%
Employer support	8 (44%)	8 (35%)	9%
Participant impact	6 (33%)	6 (26%)	7%
Enough participants	11 (61%)	13 (57%)	4%
Community need	10 (56%)	13 (57%)	-1%
TOTAL	18	23	

Funding as a sustainability characteristic was the most important difference between the two groups. While three quarters of the 23 non-Chamber program coordinators listed funding as an important sustainability factor, less than one-half of the 18 Chamber program coordinators emphasized it. We suspect that funding and participant recruitment may be more tightly linked for Chamber programs, which may rely more on tuition, while the other programs may rely more on grants. Note that employer support is also slightly more important for Chamber programs. This is also consistent with our interpretations of difference in emphasis on the internal characteristics displayed in Table 4.

The next largest difference in external factors reported by each group concerns community involvement and impact. Both factors were mentioned more often by the Chamber program coordinators. On the other hand, having a community support network was reported more by the non-Chamber programs than by the Chamber programs. These differences likely reflect different understandings and practices of relating to the community. Employer support, in the case of the Chamber programs, might be as important in ensuring that the Chamber's business members support the program as it is in filling classes, and could substitute for the broader community networks emphasized by the other coordinators. Also, as we discussed for the differences in the internal indicators, Chamber programs are already part of existing business networks in the community, while government programs need to build a support network from scratch.

Conclusion

This research shows that CBLE program coordinators have much more sophisticated and complex definitions of program sustainability than the scant literature on the issue would suggest. Indeed, in the context of the never-ending quest for stable funding, it would be easy for program coordinators to think of sustainability that shallowly. But their thinking on sustainability extends far beyond funding.

Developing more complex definitions of sustainability as we have done here can potentially increase the sophistication with which program coordinators and researchers approach the issue of program sustainability. In an increasingly pressured context of evidence-based funding and struggles to find best practices, having a multi-faceted model of sustainability can show both practitioners and funders the complex strategic options for sustainability and reinforce the wisdom that there is no silver bullet and no single path to program sustainability. Indeed, our subsequent application of this model to the Wisconsin CBLE programs showed extremely complex combinations of best practices toward sustainability (Stoecker, Willis, & Lersch, 2008). This is especially important because most of these programs are managed by single individuals who have to keep track of this complexity, find the best combination for his or her program, and then put that combination into practice and manage it.

We do not know, from this initial research, exactly how these variables interact, or may be affected by specific contexts. In particular, we cannot yet reach strong conclusions on the differences between Chamber and non-Chamber CBLE programs. We are also not certain whether our findings apply to other regions of the country, but suspect they may, as they mirror some of the findings for public health programs in other places. These questions will need to wait for future

research. We offer these findings as a springboard for both practitioners and scholars to more effectively explore and address the questions and challenges of program sustainability. For those of us who lead and support these programs, we need to move beyond defining sustainability as funding, and better account for the role of the community base in sustaining community-based leadership education.

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