

Blandin Community Leadership Program Alumni survey

Since 1985, the Blandin Community Leadership Program (BCLP) has provided intensive leadership training to over 4,300 active community leaders from 320 communities throughout rural Minnesota. The program is nationally recognized and works with emerging and established leaders in rural communities to deepen their understanding of community dynamics and strengthen their skills for initiating and managing change.

Wilder Research, on behalf of the Blandin Foundation, conducted a survey for 4,440 Blandin Foundation Leadership Program Alumni in September and October 2007, as a follow-up to the 2005 baseline survey. Of the 3,775 eligible Alumni, 1,685 questionnaires were completed, yielding a response rate of 45 percent. The survey was designed as a self-administered questionnaire; all Alumni received an invitation by email or U.S. mail to complete the survey on the internet, to call Wilder Research for a mailed copy, or to complete the survey over the phone.

The BCLP Alumni who completed the survey identified the five top most critical issues facing rural Minnesota communities today, identified rural communities' experience with important issues, rated the quality of community services and infrastructure, identified communities' strengths and weaknesses, and identified the key issues they want to address as community leaders. The data is analyzed by region (Minnesota Initiative Foundation regions and metro area) to examine regional versus statewide issues and trends. This report also provides information about changes in Alumni responses from the baseline to the follow-up survey.

Survey results

Characteristics of responding Alumni

Nearly half of the responses were received from Alumni in two regions: the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation (23%) and the Northland Foundation (23%). The remaining half of the respondents were distributed among the other four Minnesota Initiative Foundation regions: Southwest Minnesota Foundation region (15%), the Initiative Foundation region (14%), West Central Initiative Foundation (12%), and the Northwest Minnesota Foundation region (8%). The location of the regions is displayed in Figure 2 in the full report.

The age distribution of respondents within each region reflected the age distribution of all Alumni statewide with the largest number of respondents in the 45-54 age group (36%) followed by the 55-64 age group (33%). Men and women answered the survey in roughly equal proportions. Age and gender distributions were comparable within each region except within the West Central Initiative Foundation where 62 percent of the respondents were female and 38 percent were male. Statewide, over 90 percent of the respondents identified themselves as White; 3 percent identified themselves as American Indian/Alaskan Native; and 1 percent identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. All other ethnic groups were represented by less than 1 percent of all respondents. This pattern is similar in each region except for the Northwest Initiative Foundation region where 11 percent of the respondents were American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Two-thirds of the respondents (66%) live in towns under 10,000 people, 13 percent live in rural areas, and 15 percent live in cities with more than 20,000 residents.

Community issues

BCLP Alumni identified the top five critical issues that need to be addressed by their communities in the next three to five years:

- Retaining businesses that pay a household-supporting wage
- Providing quality K-12 education
- Having accessible quality health care
- Attracting businesses that pay a household-supporting wage
- Addressing the increasing cost of health care

The availability of quality health care, one of the top five critical issues on this list, was also among the top three areas of recent improvement identified by Alumni. So, although communities are doing better, Alumni feel that their communities should do more over the next few years to make quality health care accessible to their community. Another top critical issue that needs to be addressed, the cost of health care and insurance, is an issue respondents reported has become worse over the past three to five years.

Respondents continue to be concerned with many of the same issues as those that were raised in the 2005 baseline survey; the same issues were identified as critical in both surveys, although the rank order differed slightly. In addition, respondents' perceptions have changed little since 2005 in terms of how their communities are doing in addressing specific issues. However, Alumni reported that their communities were doing slightly better with *reducing illegal drug use* and were doing slightly worse with *reducing the number of people who live in poverty*.

Quality of community

Overall, 94 percent of respondents said they would "definitely" or "probably" recommend their community as a good place to live. A majority (60%) said the quality of life in their communities is "good" and over one-quarter (28%) said "very good." Nearly half of the respondents said the quality of life in their community is "much better" (4%) or "somewhat better" (44%) compared to five years ago, and 38 percent said it is "about the same." However, 13 percent said the quality of life in their community is "somewhat worse" than five years ago.

Concerns about community economic health align with economic development and employment items that the respondents rate as the most critical issues to address in their communities. A large majority (82%) feel the economic health of their communities is "good" (36%) or "fair" (46%). Only 6 percent said the economic health of their community is "very good," but 12 percent said the economic health of their community is "poor."

The Alumni observe that rural Minnesota is growing more racially and ethnically diverse. Overall, a majority of respondents reported that their communities have become "much more diverse" (17%) or "somewhat more diverse" (41%) over the past five years. The percentage reporting increased diversity ranged from 45 percent in the Northland Foundation region to 74 percent in the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation region. Some Alumni (39%) perceive that their communities have "stayed about the same" regarding diversity. A small proportion of respondents (2% or less) reported that their communities have become less diverse.

Results from the 2005 baseline and 2007 follow-up surveys are similar with regard to respondents' ratings of the overall quality of life, ratings of the economic health of their communities, perceptions of increasing diversity, and recommendation of their community as a good place to live. On the other hand, a slightly smaller proportion of respondents in 2007 than in 2005 indicated that quality of life and economic health were "somewhat worse" or "much worse," while the percentages indicating that these issues had "stayed about the same" increased slightly.

Community strengths and weaknesses

Alumni were asked to respond to several statements about their community by indicating whether they "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree" with the statement. Positive community attributes that received a high level of agreement from Alumni are considered strengths and positive attributes that received a high level of disagreement and negative statements that received a high level of agreement are considered weaknesses. According to Alumni, the strengths (in order of importance, so the item listed first received the best rating) in their community include:

- Being able to count on neighbors
- Natural resources
- Feelings of safety
- Access to natural resources for all residents
- A crime rate that is the same or lower than in similar communities
- Available services for persons with alcohol or drug addiction
- A sense of trust among residents
- Good opportunities for recreation for all residents
- Internet use and distance learning in schools
- Productively engaged older adults

The weaknesses (in reverse order, so the items rated worst are listed last) in their community include:

- The economy in the community is not well diversified
- There is not enough affordable quality child care in the community
- Political conflict is not handled in a healthy way
- The community is not generally welcoming to people of diverse backgrounds
- People from different backgrounds do not fill leadership roles
- The community does not recognize diversity as a strength
- The community does not have enough jobs that pay household-supporting wages

The strengths and weaknesses identified by Alumni in 2007 were the same as those identified by Alumni in 2005, with a few exceptions. Respondents to the

2007 follow-up survey highlighted two additional strengths (*productively engaged older adults* and *a crime rate that is the same or lower than in similar communities*) and one additional weakness (the belief that *the economy in their community is not well diversified*). In addition, some weaknesses identified by respondents in 2005 were no longer highlighted in 2007: *increasing illegal drug use* and *lack of opportunities for people of all backgrounds to participate in planning and decision-making*.

Issues that Alumni want to address as community leaders

The top issue respondents said they want to address as community leaders is *business development* (18%, n=233, statewide), which includes the following specific issues:

- Economic development
- Retaining, expanding, and attracting business
- Funding for business (development, building, or equipment)
- Downtown revitalization
- High speed internet availability

The second most frequent response fell into the closely related category of employment (16%, n=205, statewide), which includes comments about increasing the number of jobs paying household-supporting wages with benefits; providing accessible job training; and recruiting and retaining young people, especially college graduates in the area. Responses were similar among respondents to the 2005 baseline survey.

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For more information

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