

## **Blandin Reservation Community Leadership Program retention interviews**

### **A study of causes and opportunities to address program attrition**

Operated by the Blandin Foundation, the Blandin Reservation Community Leadership Program (BRCLP) is a culturally-specific program designed to develop and sustain healthy reservation communities by building on community strengths and leveraging community assets.

Since 2001, the BRCLP has provided leadership training to more than 160 leaders in 11 Minnesota Indian Reservations. Programming consists of eight days of training: an initial five-day residential retreat, a two-day residential workshop three months later, and a one-day workshop six months following the initial retreat.

Noticing a drop-off in attendance over the course of the training, the Blandin Foundation contracted with Wilder Research to interview alumni from BRCLP cohorts from 2006 to 2009. The goal of the interviews was to better understand the reasons for attrition in attendance, and what the Blandin Leadership Team might be able to do to improve attendance.

#### ***Key findings***

##### **Overall experience and satisfaction with training**

The BRCLP has an excellent reputation among the Reservation communities. Alumni described BRCLP as an important learning opportunity; it was a chance to develop new leadership skills, build stronger communities and provide Reservation communities with services in areas where they might be lacking.

##### **Reasons people are able to attend**

**Support systems.** Having a support system in place is necessary to successfully attend the BRCLP. A wide range of support was mentioned including: support from employers and coworkers, spouses and family members and from the tribal council and community.

**Commitment.** Commitment and dedication to BRCLP and to improving the Reservation encourages attendance at BRCLP.

**Financial support.** Most participants cannot afford to lose paid work time. If their employer does not allow paid time off for the training, a scholarship provided by the Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation.

##### **Perceptions of barriers to attendance**

The alumni were asked to share their ideas as to why they think their peers may have dropped out of BRCLP. The following are the *perceptions* most often mentioned during the interviews:

**Work constraints.** Nearly all respondents speculated that work and job responsibilities might prohibit some of their peers from attending BRCLP.

**Time constraints.** Some respondents suggested that the length of time of the initial retreat (five days) might be too long for some to be away from home.

**Lack of commitment.** Many respondents felt that perhaps there was not enough discussion during recruitment about the extent of the commitment necessary to complete the BRCLP training.

**Family and personal responsibilities.** Nearly all respondents stated that personal and family responsibilities may, in many cases, take precedence over the training.

**Location.** Alumni speculated that perhaps a barrier to attending the workshops was the distance and travel time to get there.

##### **Actual reported barriers to attendance**

Alumni who had missed one or more of the training sessions were asked about the factors that prevented them from attending. While some of the barriers echoed the perceived barriers, many did not. Respondents mentioned the following as actual barriers to attendance:

*continued*

- Inability to take time off from work (50%).
- BRCLP training was not as urgent as other priorities at the time (50%).
- Individual circumstances such as personal or family emergencies (39%).
- Feeling unprepared for Workshops I and II (30%).

### The role of communication in return rates

Overall, alumni are very satisfied with the communication they have had with the Blandin Leadership Team during recruitment and other phases of the BRCLP process. They did not believe that inadequate communication was a barrier to attendance. Even those who did not return for one or both of the workshops reported that they felt communication between alumni and the Blandin Leadership team was “just right.”

In addition, nearly all respondents (about 9 out of 10) reported that they are in communication regularly with other alumni.

### Conclusions and issues to consider

After careful reflection of both respondents’ perceptions of barriers and the actual reported barriers as well as consideration of respondents answers to the question “*Do you have any other ideas around how to reduce the drop rate for BRCLP Training and the workshops?*” the following recommendations might be considered as potential approaches for helping to achieve a higher proportion of participants to attend all of the training sessions:

#### Keep leaders engaged

- Provide greater support in the three months between the five-day retreat and Workshop I to keep participants engaged.

- Express to participants that even if they did not complete the goals they set up during the five-day retreat, they will still benefit from Workshop I.
- Make a concerted effort to re-engage those who may have missed Workshop I to bring them up to speed in preparation for Workshop II.

### Keep leaders connected

- Make use of social networking sites such as Facebook to keep alumni engaged and connected with one another.
- Ask alumni in each reservation to mentor incoming leaders *before* the five-day retreat even begins
- Encourage or host community gatherings that bring alumni together.

### Recruitment

- Modify the recruitment process to include questions and conversations that help assess an individual’s level of commitment to attending.
- Be more informative during the recruitment process and the five-day retreat about what happens in Workshops I and II and how vital it is to their training as a community leader.
- Make a concerted effort to teach the history of the Blandin Foundation to alumni during recruitment or the five-day retreat.

### About the study

A total of 24 telephone interviews were completed between October and December of 2009 with alumni who had completed just some or all of the training. Questions were formulated based on preliminary interviews conducted by Blandin staff with program staff and advisory committee members who have firsthand knowledge of the dynamics of both the program and reservation communities.

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#### For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Blandin Reservation Community Leadership Program retention interviews*. For more information about this report, contact Rachel Hardeman at Wilder Research, 651-280-2687 or Valerie Shangreaux at the Blandin Foundation, 218-326-0523.

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