

**An Outcome Evaluation of the
Ohio University Leadership Project (OULP)**

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Executive Summary

- ★ This summative evaluation of the Ohio University Leadership Project (OULP) produced results that strongly suggest the OULP to be a highly effective form of professional development that meets the needs of the region's school administrators.
- ★ OULP seminars have attracted participants from 70 of Ohio's 88 counties.
- ★ Outcomes of participation go beyond changes in attitudes, knowledge, and skills to affect positively those who are under these participants' leadership, and thus constitute a deeper level of training effect. Although the effects are self-report, they are promising indicators of OULP's success as a model professional development program.
- ★ The major conclusion from this evaluation is that the OULP should continue to offer professional development in its current structure and format.

Introduction

In 1994, the Ohio University Leadership Project (OULP) began delivering much-needed professional development opportunities to school administrators in Southeastern and South Central Ohio. The initial area included the counties of Adams, Fairfield, Fayette, Gallia, Highland, Jackson, Lawrence, Meigs, Pickaway, Pike, Ross, Vinton, and Scioto. These represent the major focus of the project's work, nearly 15% of the counties in Ohio, and many of its Appalachian counties. The OULP also has expanded its service to other counties throughout the state. In fact, leaders from over three-fourths of the counties in Ohio have participated in its programs.

The OULP has focused on providing professional development in several formats that will nurture the provision of leadership, the improvement of schools, and ultimately the achievement of students. The foundation of the OULP programs is the cohort component, in which groups of administrators with similar titles (e.g., elementary principals, superintendents, etc.) attend a series of seminars together over the course of a school year. The OULP conducts other professional development programs as well, which tend to be directed at school leaders both within and outside the regions served by the cohort program. The OULP's seminars are designed utilizing experiential-based, data-based, and research-based decision-making. The programs are developed with consideration of the problem-based learning model, the study group/cluster model, and the action research model. Mentoring, reflection, and dialogue are incorporated, and the professional development is delivered on an ongoing basis via administrator cohorts, workshops and technical assistance in districts, and large-scale workshops offered statewide on particularly pertinent topics (e.g., teacher evaluation and five-year forecasting).

The overall goal of the OULP is to enhance the leadership skills of the participating school administrators. The enhanced skills of the administrators can be the basis for more effective leadership in districts and schools, and most significantly, can result in a dynamic for improved teaching and learning. The OULP has been active for eight years. At this point in the project's existence, it is essential to study the impact that the project has had on the leadership knowledge and skills of participants and more generally, to examine whether the grassroots, participative design of the project has met the professional development needs of educational leaders in manners comfortable, convenient and satisfactory to them. An outside evaluator was hired to conduct a summative evaluation of the primary component of the OULP—the cohort groups. Several overarching questions guided the evaluation:

1. What factors draw participants into this particular professional development program?

2. What do participants view to be their most pressing professional development needs?
3. What are the impediments to participation in meaningful professional development?
4. What program methods are perceived as most and least effective?
5. From the vantage of participants, what is missing from the program?
6. What are the effects of the program on the participants' professional growth? More specifically, what changes in attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs have participants experienced as a result of the project?
7. What effect has participants' professional growth had on those who are affected by participants' leadership?

In order to answer these questions, three main data collection activities were conducted during the spring of 2002. A database was created in order to be better able to analyze program documents, including participation over the past three years. Analysis of the database allowed the evaluator to determine the extent of participation across school districts and counties. A participant survey was sent to all those who had participated in cohorts during the past two years of the OULP, including 114 elementary principals, 100 secondary principals, 84 treasurers, and 75 superintendents. Focus groups were held with each of the four cohort groups in order to expand upon the themes in the participant survey, and answer more thoroughly the evaluation questions. These focus groups were attended by five elementary principals, eight secondary principals, five treasurers, and six superintendents.

Participant Survey Findings

Participation in the OULP cohort seminars over the past three years (1999-2002) has included 396 administrators from 87 school districts in 21 counties, including eight counties beyond the 13 in OULP's initial service area. The five-year forecasting seminars, which attracted treasurers who did not participate in the OULP cohorts, included 196 treasurers from across the state who did not attend other OULP seminars.

Between one third and one half of participants in the four cohort groups returned surveys, for a total of 143 respondents. Responses to the surveys indicated high levels of satisfaction with the OULP as a valuable professional development experience. Satisfaction levels did not differ significantly by cohort group, years of experience, or size of district. Those who attended regularly were significantly more satisfied than were those who attended only occasionally. Both groups, however, indicated high levels of satisfaction. Participants who had been involved with the OULP for several years were more satisfied than those who were new to the OULP. Former participants—those who had not participated in the 2001-2002 school year—were less satisfied than the long-term participants but more satisfied than the short-term participants, suggesting that satisfaction may increase for those who are new to the OULP but who continue to participate.

Five questions on the survey provided respondents an opportunity to answer in their own words. Their main reasons for participating in the OULP included the valuable and timely topics, the opportunity to share and network with peers, and to obtain professional development. Many respondents found it difficult to participate in professional development because they were uncomfortable leaving their buildings and/or had scheduling conflicts. However, support from superiors and the usefulness of the information obtained from attending the OULP seminars were factors that facilitated participation, and most of those who did not feel comfortable leaving their buildings still attended due to the benefits received.

Most participants reported experiencing growth in many different areas from participating in the OULP. A third of those responding to the survey question reported having learned technical knowledge and skills (specialized knowledge and procedures) as a result of participating in OULP. Common examples included knowledge of state and federal mandates, special education law, and five-year forecasting. Over 10% of respondents reported having better interpersonal skills as a result of participating; such skills included becoming a better listener, having a better understanding of the different personality types in a building, and establishing better communication with staff. Some respondents reported gains in self-confidence, problem-solving ability, conceptual understanding, and administrative skills.

The most effective features of the OULP, according to survey respondents, were the speakers and topics, and having the opportunity to discuss problems and solutions with peers. These themes accounted for over two thirds of the responses to the question about effective program features. Participant ownership of seminar agendas, and the flexible and relaxed learning environment were also appreciated features. When asked for suggestions for improvement, almost two thirds of respondents did not want any changes to occur ("If it is not broken, don't fix it."). A few respondents requested specific topics for the agenda, more time for roundtable discussion, changes in meeting times or locations, and distributing written minutes of seminars.

Focus Group Findings

The focus group participants were asked questions similar to the open-ended questions asked in the survey, such as reasons for participating, barriers to participation, professional development needs, effective program features, and areas of professional growth as a result of participation. In addition, focus group participants were asked whether what they were learning from participation was having an impact on those people who were affected by their leadership (e.g., staff). The main reasons for participating mirrored the responses on the survey. Participants wanted to acquire, in a "safe" and relaxed setting close to home, the explicit and tacit knowledge and skills associated with school leadership. A major benefit from participating was the opportunity to draw from colleagues, to learn alternative ways of handling problems and other ways of thinking about issues. Such interaction, both in roundtable discussions and more informally at lunch or after the seminars, was encouraged by Dr. Larson's professional and inviting manner. All participants in the focus group planned to continue participating in the OULP, with one superintendent saying he planned to continue participating even after retirement!

Although those administrators who were able and willing to take part in a focus group may or may not be representative of all OULP's participating administrators, these individuals mentioned a few barriers to participation. Like the survey respondents, discomfort in leaving the building was a barrier. However, many individuals in the focus groups mentioned that what was learned by going to the seminars was a stronger force than the discomfort in leaving the building, and helped them to overcome that and other barriers.

Staying current in their knowledge of legislation, laws, and initiatives was the most pressing professional development need of these administrators. Learning practical skills in hands-on workshops was particularly important to treasurers, who appreciated the opportunities OULP has given them to learn while completing a project, such as in the five-year forecasting seminar. Superintendents were not sure what their most pressing professional development needs were because their main consideration was being able to effectively manage the changes mandated by new legislation. The OULP, by allowing them opportunities to talk with one another and learn from skilled presenters, helped them to plan for and manage change.

Being able to more effectively manage change was a significant outcome of participation for the focus group participants. Learning to “see the big picture,” gaining perspective, and learning from others so as to “not reinvent the wheel” were common and important themes throughout the four focus groups. In addition to foster a better conceptual understanding of the administrative role, the OULP was providing administrators with the knowledge and skills to be more effective and confident communicators, problem solvers, and managers. The impact of participation in the OULP went beyond the individual participants to those affected by their leadership. Treasurers spoke of being able to make a difference in the lives of students, such as learning to budget so that a full-day kindergarten could be made available. Superintendents considered themselves far better at delegating responsibility to their principals as a result of what they learned in the OULP seminars. Principals encouraged more innovation and risk-taking among their staffs. And all groups considered themselves to be far better at encouraging leadership development than they had been prior to participating in this professional development experience.

These outcomes of the OULP go beyond changes in attitudes, knowledge, and skills, and thus constitute a deeper level of training effect. When evaluating training and professional development, one hopes to see changes in behavior on the job, and an impact on those who surround the “professionally developed” person. Such findings are rare, however. Although the effects discussed here are self-report, they are promising indicators of OULP’s success as a model professional development program.

Focus group participants liked the OULP as it was, and did not wish changes to be made. It was the gestalt, or total package, of the program that they felt was effective. They appreciated having ownership over their professional development and having the flexibility built into the program to allow for changes. Few changes to the program were suggested, and those that were mentioned were similar to what the survey respondents had suggested.

Conclusion

Overall, this evaluation of the OULP produced results that strongly suggest that the OULP is a highly effective form of professional development that meets the needs of area administrators. There were no negative comments made about the program in either the survey or the focus groups. The OULP staff may consider bringing in a co-facilitator to work with Dr. Larson, learn the culture of the OULP, and lessen the perception among participants that Dr. Larson *is* the OULP. Project staff may also wish to target recruitment efforts both at districts adjoining those where participation is high as well as those districts that lay west of Route 23. Because it is such a successful program with those who have participated, the OULP seems perfectly positioned to expand its programming. The major conclusion from this evaluation is that the OULP should continue to offer professional development in its current structure and format.