

Cultivating Black Leaders for Rural Communities: A Case Study of a Leadership Development Program at an 1890 Land-Grant Institution

Krystle J. Allen¹, Richie Roberts², Michael F. Burnett³, and J. Joey Blackburn⁴

Abstract

Rural leadership development has been a field with a long, varied history. Despite this, Black rural leadership development programs have been almost non-existent. In response, this investigation explored the effectiveness of a cooperative extension program called Learning Everyday About Development (LEAD), designed and facilitated by an 1890 land-grant university to revitalize rural communities while supporting economic development in traditionally historically Black communities in Louisiana. Three themes emerged from our qualitative analysis: (1) sparking rural leadership, (2) challenges to new leadership approaches, and (3) rethinking rural renewal. As such, we found the participants reported that LEAD was effective overall. This effectiveness was demonstrated in the first theme, sparking rural leadership. For example, the participants discussed in detail the benefits of networking at LEAD, an immense appreciation of not being forgotten, and being made aware of resources. Although participants reported they experienced growth in their leadership style and career because of participation, the extent of the growth varied substantially. The participants also reported that they devoted more time in their offices to work on grants and programming. Moving forward, we recommend a robust longitudinal evaluation of LEAD. Perhaps data from this study could provide a basis to create a framework for other Black rural development initiatives and add meaningful insight into this phenomenon.

Keywords: 1890-Land-grant university; African American; black leaders; rural leadership

Introduction and Review of Literature

Rural leadership development is not a new concept. In fact, millions of dollars have been invested in rural leadership development for over 50 years (Kaufman & Rudd, 2006). Despite this, the field has been severely under-researched (Madsen & O'Mullan, 2014). Although rural leadership development programs vary considerably in delivery and scope because the needs of each rural community have been unique, many rural leadership development programs have similar overarching goals. For example, common program goals include: (a) strengthening leaders by equipping them with the knowledge, (b) tools and resources to be successful, and (c) aiding rural leaders in utilizing their unique assets most efficiently. The unique assets addressed by rural leadership programs have included: (a) restoring historic districts, (b) downtown revitalization, (c) community history projects, (d) building attractions to inspire tourism, and (e) programs

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that focus on leadership-based skills that are specific to the community (Hustedde & Woodward, 1996).The

RuraLead Initiative (2020), an organization committed to strengthening and developing leadership in rural communities, recently conducted listening sessions regarding the need for rural leadership development throughout the Southern U.S. As a result of this work, they found, “leadership in rural communities is relational, not transactional. To create change, one has to know the place and the people from the ground up” (RuraLead Initiative, 2020, p. 1). Because of this need, rural leadership programs have become a priority for programming in the Cooperative Extension Service (CES).

Leadership Development Program Outcomes in Extension

Leadership development programs in agriculture and the CES have been in existence for decades as a way to increase the competence and understanding of community leaders (Lamm et al., 2013). Originally developed in 1983 for participants in rural areas, the first coordinated state-wide leadership development program was created by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Consequently, leadership development programming quickly expanded throughout the country and now has thousands of alumni. Because of the benefits of evaluating CES leadership programming, Sowcik et al. (2018) examined an online leadership development program whose target audience for participation was Florida County Extension Directors. As a result, participants indicated a high level of satisfaction with the online format, communication, and engagement of the instructor (Sowcik et al. 2018).

Meanwhile, Lamm et al. (2016) evaluated leadership development programs facilitated by CES in the Southern U.S. Recognizing the importance of measuring objective performance outcomes by ensuring that the programs were engaging appropriate audiences, the researchers provided evidence of program effectiveness at the individual, environment, and behavioral levels using Bandura’s (1986) social learning theory. For example, Lamm et al. (2016) assessed the individual level using the personal characteristics of respondents and found that 74% were male, and the average age of participants was 49 years old (ages ranged from 24 to 80). Of note, 92.2% of respondents identified as *White*. While interpreting the results of the evaluation, Lamm et al. (2016) highlighted how Bandura’s (1986) social learning theory helped reveal key weaknesses regarding diversity in leadership programming for CES. As a result, Lamm et al. (2016) called for a greater diversity of individuals, especially for women and individuals of color, who receive leadership training to “...ensure participants are exposed to a variety of viewpoints and can expand their social learning potential accordingly” (p. 131). Because of the South’s well-documented history of racial discrimination, it is critical to ensure that underserved groups, such as rural Black citizens, have access to leadership development opportunities in the future (RuraLead Initiative, 2020).

Cultivating Rural Black Leadership

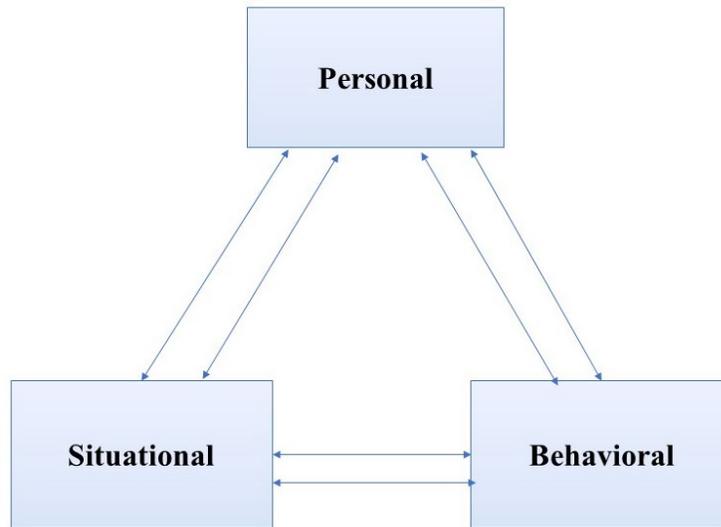
People of color in the Southern U.S. have overwhelmingly not participated in rural leadership programs (Lamm et al., 2016). As a consequence, a need emerged to expand leadership development programming for racial minority groups, particularly for Black citizens in rural communities (Lamm et al., 2016). Because of the lack of representation of Black leaders, little knowledge has existed about this phenomenon. As a result, 1890 land-grant universities have been challenged to address this issue to foster greater leadership for the Black communities (Southern University, 2021). Because rural leadership programs have grown in tandem with the national focus on improving diversity, equity, and inclusion, leadership development programs that focus on racial minority groups have witnessed an increase in funding (USDA, 2020). These changes to the funding structure of leadership development programs have allowed 1890 land-grant universities to begin to invest more purposefully in Black communities. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that the lack of participation in rural leadership development programs by rural Black leaders has resulted in a lack of knowledge about tools and resources available to help move their towns, villages, and communities forward (RuraLead Initiative, 2020). To date, little research has explicitly addressed the outcomes experienced by rural Black leaders who engage in leadership development programs, indicating this issue warranted greater attention.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informed this study was Albert Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT). Originally theorized as a *social learning theory* in the 1960s, SCT has been used to describe the influence of a complex interaction of variables (see Figure 1). For example, SCT postulates how the individual, environment, and behaviors influence learning. The key components of SCT include an individuals’ behavioral ability, expectations, self-control, self-efficacy, observational learning, and reinforcement. In this study, we used SCT to evaluate how learning was experienced during LEAD facilitated by Southern University’s CES.

Figure 1

Bandura’s (1986) Social Cognitive Theory



Viewing leadership development through this lens, allowed us to analyze how LEAD could aid in developing the talent of Black leaders in rural Louisiana. SCT, often used interchangeably with its predecessor, social learning theory, asserts that an individual’s actions and behaviors are derived to describe how individuals think, view themselves, the environment, and their perceived actions.

Background of the Study

The current study investigated the effectiveness of a rural 1890 land-grant CES program called *Learning Everyday About Development* (LEAD), which was designed to revitalize economic development in traditionally underserved communities. The communities participating in the program, primarily historically Black, have several barriers to success, including limited funding and little access to resources. LEAD targeted community leaders for the program, such as mayors, police juries, city council members, clergy, and other change agents. Programming topics ranged from *How to Apply for Grants* to *Revitalizing Historic Districts/Main Street*, which addressed various aspects of economic development. To accomplish this, the community leaders were invited to attend full-day sessions free of charge in 2019. The sessions were initially designed as part of a series and scheduled to be facilitated in various regions throughout the state quarterly; however, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, only two sessions were facilitated. In addition to the scheduled programs, the CES at Southern University disseminated information on certifications and program availability for the stakeholders in their areas. The LEAD program was implemented twice. The first session was held on October 8, 2019, and the second occurred on January 30, 2020. The third session was tentatively scheduled for April 2020; however, the event was canceled as a

result of the COVID-19 global pandemic. For the current investigation, we focused exclusively on the outcomes of Black participants of LEAD since they were the target audience for programming.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to describe the experiences and perspectives of black rural leaders regarding their participation in LEAD. Therefore, this investigation aligned with the American Association for Agricultural Education’s *Research Priority 7: Addressing Complex Problems* (Andenero et al., 2016).

Methodology

We used an instrumental case study design to guide this study (Stake, 1995). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), case study research “involves the study of a case (or cases) within a real-life, contemporary context or setting” (p. 97). The case was bounded by time and place (Stake, 1995). For example, the data collected examined a program for Black rural leaders in Louisiana. To achieve this, we used a non-probability sampling approach to select the participants (Patton, 2002). We achieved this by employing a purposeful sampling of the participants. Maxwell (2005) defined purposeful sampling as a selection strategy in which activities, individuals, or settings have been selected deliberately to provide information that cannot be achieved from other choices. Therefore, we recruited the extension agent responsible for creating and facilitating LEAD to achieve a purposeful sample. Then, the participants were also selected using a maximum variation approach to fully represent the varying and multiple perspectives of program participants (Patton, 2002). As a result, this study included five participants (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participants’ Personal and Professional Characteristics

Pseudonym	Race	Job-Title	Affiliation to Bounded System	Years of Experience
John	African American	CEP Professional	Facilitator	One year as CEP professional; former Mayor for eight years
Xavier	African American	Mayor	Session #1 and Session #2 Participant	Two years as Mayor (1st term)
Jayden	African American	Mayor	Session #1 and Session #2 Participant	Two years as Mayor (1st term)
Xyla	African American	Executive Assistant	Session #1 Participant	10+ years
L.J.	African American	Council Member	Session #2 Participant	1.5 years

Data Collection and Analysis

The various sources of data collected helped enhance the rigor by triangulating the study's findings. We interviewed participants using a vital meeting platform because of the COVID-19 global pandemic to ensure participants' safety. The interviews were recorded with a separate recording device. The audio recordings were stored on a password-protected computer until transcribed. Verbatim transcription of the study's findings was conducted promptly after each interview session. Participants were then provided a copy of their interview transcripts to review for accuracy, address any areas of concern, and provide further explanation or clarity – a process known as *member checking* (Patton, 2002). Participant interviews occurred over several months, beginning with the LEAD's facilitator. The interviews were guided by five major guiding questions and 35 probing questions. Probing questions were used to keep the interviewee talking while skillfully guiding them to answer the purpose of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview questions were developed to capture the essence of Black rural leaders' experiences during LEAD and determine the participants' perceptions of the program's effectiveness. Lastly, it is important to note that the lead researcher engaged as a participant-observer during data collection for this study (Creswell, 2005). As a key instrument for data collection and interpreter of the research findings, we scrutinized this bounded system within its natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This allowed us to simultaneously understand the social structures and processes without disturbing or influencing the context (Stake, 1995). Additionally, the lead researcher attended both sessions of LEAD to observe and capture ethnographic fieldnotes.

This study followed Creswell's (2009) data analysis procedures. Creswell's (2009) first step is to "organize and prepared the data for analysis" (p.185). In this phase, we organized all data sources into a single document to prepare the data for analysis. The second phase of Creswell's (2009) analytic process is for researchers to familiarize themselves with the data. To accomplish this, we read through each source to "get intimate with the data" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 157). This allowed us to understand the information participants shared more in-depth. In this third phase, we began to analyze the data. Therefore, we employed Saldaña's (2021) coding approaches in which we engaged in first cycle and second-cycle coding. This process helped reduce our initial codes. During this process, we used structural coding to emerge initial codes (Saldaña, 2021). In the second cycle, axial coding, we reduced the initial codes in categories by scrutinizing their relationships. Finally, we used thematic coding to emerge themes from the data to identify a detailed description of the bounded case (Saldaña, 2021). In the final step, we aimed to understand and present the themes in a *story*. As a result, the lead researchers' experiences as a cooperative extension professional informed and lent to our understanding of the participants' experiences. We focused solely on the data before us and remained true to the meaning-making process. As a result of this process, the study's three themes emerged.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, we aimed to uphold Tracy's (2010) criteria for high-quality qualitative studies, that included: (a) a worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. We used the following practices and methods to achieve the criteria for a high-quality study. To ensure my topic was worthy, we aimed to identify a topic that was relevant, significant, and interesting. Through research, we uncovered that rural Black leaders were either not participating or not aware of leadership development programs. Thus, we found it very important and timely to capture the essence of their experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of LEAD. To enhance the rigor of this study, we grounded our process in a theoretical lens and immersed ourselves in the field. For example, the lead researcher participated in planning meetings to understand the thought and processes used in designing and developing LEAD. She also participated as a participant-observer to interact with participants while capturing ethnographic fieldnotes. We aimed to collect a vast amount of rich data that could be analyzed and triangulated. Lastly, we sought to have an ethical, meaningful, and

significant case study by approaching it so that it could add to the literature on rural Black leaders while addressing their lack of access to existing leadership development programs. Additionally, we meaningfully ensured that our purpose, literature, findings, conclusions, and recommendations were all aligned and interconnected.

Reflexivity

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that researchers' reflexivity was their attempt to *position themselves* within the investigation. In qualitative research, researchers are a data collection tool, and while they should strive to be as free from bias as possible; it is also expected for the researcher to disclose their background, how their background factors into their interpretation of the data, biases they may have, and what do they gain from conducting this study. As a result, it was important to disclose the following information. The lead researcher identified as an African- American cisgender female. She attended college at Southern University as an undergraduate student, and has been an employee at Southern University in the Cooperative Extension Department for over 10 years. Additionally, she recently received her Ph.D. in Agricultural and Extension Education from Louisiana State University. It is also important to note that she was present at both sessions of LEAD. Her interest in Black leaders contributed to her earning a second master's degree with a concentration in leadership development. She was hopeful that this study would inform program development practices within the Cooperative Extension Department and discover mutual measures of program effectiveness from the perceptions of extension professionals and program participants. The other researchers were faculty at Louisiana State University and assisted in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Findings

During the collection of data, participants described their perceptions of the program's effectiveness and how it influenced the way in which we approached the investigation. The research findings were derived from analyzing several data sources, such as interviews, conference documents, observations, ethnographic field notes, and pictures. In total, three themes emerged from our analysis: (1) sparking rural leadership, (2) challenges to new leadership approaches, and (3) rethinking rural renewal.

Theme 1: Sparking Rural Leadership

The first theme, sparking rural leadership, described how participants' motivation to become a quality rural leader improved as a result of LEAD. For example, the participants reported they sought to develop themselves further by enhancing their leadership style by learning from more experienced professionals. The lead researcher observed the priority that participants placed on networking with others at both sessions. As an illustration, during breaks, the participants would instinctively get up with a stack of business cards in hand and *work the room*. The lead researcher also noticed the younger participants would seemingly hold onto every word of the older, more experienced participants. On this point, L.J. explained: "When we first were invited, before we had our new Council Members in office... [participating in LEAD] was kind of an opportunity to get comfortable in [my] new position and see what the position was going to be about and learning about communicating as a team [from the program facilitators and other mayors]."

Meanwhile, Xavier explained how networking during the event motivated him to connect with individuals in his community more authentically. He explained: "what I was able to learn from [LEAD] was a level of wisdom through networking and communication and understanding how to read people [in my community] and not allow them to be able to pull me down while trying to be compassionate to what they need." Xavier continued: "I was able to gain wisdom and application of knowledge to situations from [other program participants], and they were able to learn from me [about] how to engage a younger generation through different technology and different ways of reaching out to them." As a result,

participants who had less experience, such as Xavier, reported that LEAD opened their eyes to the value of networking and navigating leadership roles in rural, Black communities. On this point, L.J. also articulated: “when you go to [LEAD]...you mix with other people... if you sit with the people that you are always with, you basically know everything that goes on at your office, but if you sit with someone else, you’re getting an inside look of what goes on in other offices as well.” He also added that LEAD “reassured me that we are actually on the right path.” It is important to note that all participants self-reported that the knowledge and skills they acquired from their LEAD sessions were “useful and could be applied to my professional activities.”

Several participants, as well as the facilitator, also provided insight into how the structure of the conference influenced their perceptions of rural leadership. For example, John, the program facilitator said: “The second one [LEAD session] didn’t have as many people, but the audience was more engaged.” John also mentioned, “In the first conference, basically no questions were asked, the second conference, it got more in-depth with questions.” The quality of the presenters also greatly influenced the participants’ perceptions of how to foster leadership in their communities through communication. On this point, Xyla added:

...the main one I really liked was realistic. She had no cards, nothing written down. She spoke from experience. She spoke from what she is doing and what she’s going through, and it just made it so much easier because once she started speaking, everybody started getting in tune because she was giving real life scenarios, real realistic. And for the program, like everybody was professional, but conservative. She was professional, but she was way more relaxed. So, when your speaker is relaxed, guess what happens to your audience? They become relaxed as well. She was just a relatable, relaxed speaker, and everybody in the room immediately relaxed.

During data collection, the lead research jotted in her fieldnotes that the audience paid close attention to the presenters. Typically, at other programs, the lead researcher would notice a few individuals playing on their phones or just staring into space daydreaming; however, it appeared to the lead researcher that the speakers had the full attention of the entire audience throughout the conference. Consequently, it seemed that the LEAD participants had a genuine interest in the content and chose to remain engaged throughout the entire session. Participants also reported that improving their community’s social and economic foundation motivated them during LEAD. For example, some participants reported that learning how to improve these factors contributed to their decision to attend the professional development opportunity. Others, however, suggested that through LEAD, they began to recognize that community and economic development were areas of weakness that they should act upon more aggressively after returning home. Xavier expanded on this notion: “we wanted to go to the conference to understand and be able to bring some things that would happen in major cities to be able to give it to smaller, rural cities and town through different avenues, such as grant writing and resources available.” Moreover, Jayden explained he was “hoping that we get insight on how to rebuild our community as a whole, to build a foundation to where, if we are no longer in those positions anymore, the foundation we started from just attending different conferences, it’ll stay where it’s at or keep moving forward.” Xyla also expressed similar sentiments when describing the struggles of Louisiana’s most rural areas that lack access to many resources. She also mentioned that she often feels her town is “forgotten about” regarding new opportunities.

It is important to note that during observations, the lead researcher captured jottings regarding the peak attentiveness of participants, which occurred when the presenter’s placed emphasis on enhancing historic districts for rural communities. The engagement and questions posed from participants suggested they had a desire to lead restoration efforts and to make their historic downtowns more appealing. For instance, a conference participant stood in session #2 and asked, “Yeah, yall will pay to get it up and going but who is going to keep it going, who is going to maintain it when the money is gone... I know y’all not gone pay for it forever.” The audience joined in applause and a traditional southern head nod of approval,

which opened up an important conversation about the role of leadership in rural spaces and how it must continue to be developed, strengthened, and adaptive to their everchanging needs.

Theme 2: Challenges to New Leadership Approaches

Although the participants noted that LEAD sparked new ways of thinking about rural leadership for Black communities, they also explained how the professional development opportunity led to shifts in how they approached leadership in their careers. As an illustration, Xavier, who attended both LEAD sessions, reported that he increased from “five to eight hours” dedicated to strategic rural development planning weekly. He also emphasized helping aspiring entrepreneurs obtain “small business loans” and other critical resources. Finally, Xavier explained that after LEAD he began “following through” on his commitments more consistently and was also able to communicate about issues and problems more “positively,” which reduced conflicts and disagreements among key individuals.

Xyla and L.J. also agreed the conference “shifted their approaches to leadership,” but they could not quantify how much time they spent implementing new skills acquired through LEAD. Jayden, however, reported that he increased time dedicated to “networking” with individuals in his local community. He explained: “I spend a lot of my time doing something that [the LEAD facilitators] talked about, and that is networking... because living in a rural community, if you’re going to get some stuff done, you don’t necessarily always have the resources.” In addition to networking, Jayden also spoke in detail about how his efforts to improve the resources available to individuals in his rural community changed as a result of LEAD. He described his efforts:

I want to say [I partnered with individuals from the] watershed initiative [after LEAD]. We applied for some grants and we’re still in the process now of getting those grants. We made it through the first phase of the application. So, hopefully, we will make it to the next phase of the [grant award process]. I was also able to [secure resources our local high school] and let them know about the scholarships that are being offered to the ag department.

Despite these positive changes to the participants’ approaches, they did note some key challenges that complicated their role as a leader. Because leaders have been tasked with navigating complex barriers faced by their communities such made the challenges of rural leaders even more acute because they have historically had fewer resources. Consequently, the participants realized that “adaptability” was key to successfully navigating these complications and barriers. The five participants of this study expanded on the barriers they faced when adapting their leadership approach in greater detail. For example, Jayden explained that the largest barrier he encountered was identifying community members capable of assisting with new initiatives. Further, he noted that because his staff was already “overworked and underpaid, the challenge is when you live in a poverty-stricken community, you know, there is a lack of education.” Meanwhile, Xyla articulated how the challenges introduced by the COVID-19 global pandemic reshaped the challenges of her work. She explained the pandemic made her largely put her career on hold due to meetings and communication about new ideas largely stopping because the city council was not allowed to meet outside of their regularly scheduled face-to-face meetings. She explained, “we try to meet one time per month, but it’s breaking laws. So, we have to be mindful of how we communicate and talk about things. We can talk amongst a few of us. Still, not everybody will be in attendance.” Finally, Xyla and L.J. detailed that in their rural communities they faced a resistance to change because individuals in their community were content “with the way things were always done.” She expanded: “when people are content. You try to bring about change, it makes them uncomfortable. So, it’s like a fight, just constantly fighting.”

Theme 3: Rethinking Rural Renewal

During our analysis of data, it became evident that participants’ understanding and strategies for inspiring rural renewal varied considerably. On this point, Xavier explained that his goal was to bring about change to ensure that the resources available to urban populations could also be accessed by Black citizens

in his rural community. Additionally, he explained that because of LEAD, he now placed more emphasis on ensuring that individuals in his community had awareness and competence to secure key resources. He believed that creating this understanding also helped to “build bridges between community members and creates a mutual understanding of different [happenings] and initiatives that may be going on in their community...” Meanwhile, L.J. articulated that his purpose for attending LEAD was to learn how to tap into new resources. Because leaders should be forward-thinking, L.J. wanted to leave a lasting legacy by creating sustainable resources in his rural community that would survive long after he was gone.

When reflecting on how LEAD could inspire renewal for rural, Black communities, the participants used several recurrent terms such as “connections,” “networking,” “learning,” and “creativity.” Further, because of LEAD, all participants reported they felt more confident in “unlocking previously untapped resources.” On this point, Jayden stressed the need for and importance of LEAD for rural Louisiana:

What they did with the LEAD conference is something that needs to go on all around the state of Louisiana with these rural Black communities, because there are many that do not know that these things [resources] are available. And if you are not constant, if you're not in the loop of it, you won't know because some folk [people] are not going to share with you things that we are able to learn in that LEAD conference. So it's very educational, very informative, and it's very much needed throughout the state of Louisiana, especially in our small town, and other small towns and villages; we have been able to reach out to different agencies throughout the state to start a lot of communication...I would encourage anyone who can take advantage of the LEAD conference to do so, to bring it to your community because it's well worth the investment in time and effort.

Although the perceptions of the LEAD program were highly favorable, we sought to understand how the participants interpreted the program's effectiveness more broadly. During interviews, therefore, we asked the participants how they would describe the effectiveness of LEAD. All participants reported they experienced increased “knowledge,” “skills,” and “abilities” – key indicators of effectiveness. Despite this, John, the program's facilitator, asserted that programs were only effective when participants “utilize the knowledge and resources gained.” John also noted, there is “no cookie-cutter approach to Cooperative Extension programming” and “different things work in different communities. So, what may be unworkable in this community, maybe exactly what another community would need.” Using this frame to analyze LEAD, we noted that the participants overwhelmingly linked its effectiveness to their ability to inspire productivity and results for Black rural renewal. For instance, Jayden explained that he perceived that LEAD was effective because “after the program, you can see the fruit. You see that the community is better. The people quality of life has improved for Black people.” Several other concepts emerged as participants discussed their formative experiences and characteristics that influenced the effectiveness of LEAD. When asked to describe the personal growth that he experienced, Xavier stated, “basically, my strength is that leadership is my strong point. I am easy to get along with, and I can get people to talk.” In short, participants believed their formative experiences and personal characteristics influenced their worldview and how they perceived the program's success. Additionally, their leadership roles reduced barriers to participating in programs that aimed to improve their rural, Black communities.

Conclusions, Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this case study was to describe the experiences and perspectives of Black rural leaders regarding their participation in LEAD. Through our analysis of data, we found the participants reported that LEAD was effective overall. This effectiveness was demonstrated in the first theme, *sparkling rural leadership*. For example, the participants discussed in detail during their interviews the benefits of networking at the conference, an immense appreciation of not being forgotten, being made aware of resources, and the relatability of the presenters. Although participants reported they experienced growth in their leadership style and in their career as a result of participating in LEAD, the extent of the growth varied

substantially. Further, the rural Black leaders in this study were largely lack knowledge of leadership opportunities, resources, and social connections (Roberts & Edwards, 2020). For example, all participants spoke about the importance of networking and securing outside resources, i.e., revitalization programs and grants, to enhance their rural Black communities. The participants also reported that they devoted more time in their offices to work on grants and programming after their participation in LEAD.

We conclude that LEAD supported participants' improved accountability (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011), innovation (Kouzes & Posner, 2002), ability to define goals (Bass, 1981), and communication (Jacobs, 1983). Moreover, the rural Black leaders came to the program with a pre-existing worldview that was shaped by personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (Bandura, 1986). For example, Xavier explained during his interview that he came from a lineage of leaders – although his grandmother was not an elected official, she was a strong pillar in the community. Therefore, LEAD helped him understand how to carry on this tradition. All participants echoed a similar sentiment. We also conclude that participants were motivated to strengthen their leadership approach and practices as a result of their participation in LEAD. For example, in this study, the participants reported that they began to improve how they approached leadership regarding various projects and long-term planning in their rural communities after LEAD. Despite this, the participants rarely reported success quickly. Instead, they reported it was ongoing as they implemented changes gradually in a way that could be sustained over time. It should also be noted that participants' formative experiences appeared to be a critical contributing factor to improving participants' motivation to strengthen their leadership approach and practices moving forward.

Therefore, we recommend CES programs regularly and consistently offer professional development programs to promote rural leadership in Louisiana. Current programs tend to focus on leadership development solely. However, data from this investigation suggested that LEAD supported participants' leadership growth while also providing opportunities for additional development. Consequently, we recommend that extension professionals complete short- and long-term evaluations while also considering participants existing personal and environmental characteristics and factors (Bandura, 1986). Most extension professionals conduct short-term evaluations to measure impacts because it is easier (Lamm et al., 2013). However, collecting data from both short and long-term evaluations could better demonstrate whether reciprocal determinism exists while providing insight into the types of reinforcements that could be most useful, concepts that align with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. We also recommend that program designers identify the facets of LEAD that contributed most to participants' success. The continuous process of evaluating and making critical adjustments for the program could promote improvement and ensure the program facilitators adequately meet the needs of the participants. Extension professionals should also use Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory as a lens to understand the role of self-efficacy as Black rural leaders engage in leadership development programming. For instance, using this lens could help describe how their self-confidence evolves after participation. Perhaps by better understanding self-efficacy's role, we could better position program administrators to cultivate rural Black leadership.

Because networking through LEAD was vital, we conclude that participants' understanding of how to navigate leadership challenges in rural communities expanded as a result of their participation. The rural Black leaders examined in this investigation appeared to have little access to information regarding available resources, grants, and funding. As a result, networking, modeling, and observational learning through LEAD allowed the participants to acquire new information and adapt their behaviors to meet the needs of their rural communities – concepts supported by Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Moving forward, we recommend creating, maintaining, and regularly updating a database of resources available to rural communities. This database could allow rural leaders access to a composite list of funding, grants, resources, and programs available to their communities. Additionally, if regularly checked, it would grant rural Black leaders access to applications and other pertinent information they would have routinely missed. An additional recommendation is to create networking opportunities for rural Black leaders. These

networking opportunities could serve as observational learning and further support leaders' development. We also recommend extension professionals create a networking program that will allow seasoned and experienced Black rural leaders to mentor young professionals. This change could help create a Black rural leadership pipeline to support emerging leaders to address issues such as food insecurity, the lack of access to resources, and opportunities to better support marginalized populations (Alston et al., 2019, 2020; Fergus et al., 2021; Jackson & Roberts, 2021; Minus et al., 2021; Ramage et al., 2021).

Sandmann and Vandeberg (1995) called for more experiential learning opportunities to enhance rural leadership development. Therefore, we recommend that extension professionals create hands-on learning and group reflection opportunities for rural Black leaders. Perhaps such opportunities could enhance the practical and theoretical knowledge of rural Louisiana communities that have been predominantly Black. Finally, we conclude that participating in LEAD helped improve participants' ability to foster rural renewal in Black communities. LEAD was developed to help identify issues, barriers, and challenges in rural Black communities while empowering leaders to create practical solutions. Data from this investigation suggested that participation in LEAD equipped Black rural leaders with knowledge, tools, and resources to overcome some of the challenges they have encountered in their careers. These challenges ranged from understanding how to address utility bill payment processing issues to helping them foster greater community cohesiveness. Therefore, we recommend that LEAD programming be expanded more broadly throughout Louisiana. Because extension programming must be relative to the needs of the communities they serve, we recommend including greater reinforcements for positive and lasting changes and behaviors in LEAD. For example, participants could be assigned strategic leadership exercises to recruit additional leaders in their local communities. This support could help improve the diversity of rural leaders (Roberts et al., 2020). As Lamm et al. (2016) suggested, there has been a weakness regarding the racial diversity in leadership programming for CES. Therefore, we recommend that extension professionals identify the expectations and reinforcements that could better support Black rural leaders' participation in leadership development programs in the future. Finally, we recommend a robust longitudinal evaluation of LEAD. Perhaps data from this longitudinal evaluation could provide a basis to create a framework for other Black rural development initiatives and add meaningful insight into Black rural development. This data could develop the field further because of the lack of knowledge and empirical evidence on Black rural leadership.

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