

## **Leadership program has personal and community impact in Superior and Douglas County**

Communities reap rewards when residents become involved, raise their awareness of issues, and sharpen their leadership skills. Building a community where people want to live, work and play was the goal of community leaders who initiated Leadership Superior/Douglas County. The University of Wisconsin-Superior Center for Continuing Education/Extension teamed with the Superior/Douglas County Chamber of Commerce and The Development Association to launch this effort aimed at empowering citizens with information and skills to heighten awareness and deepen civic involvement. Since 1992 more than 300 persons have taken part in the 10-month program. The program has played a key role in increasing civic participation in the area. Participants say the program has improved their skills in working with others, and has increased their community involvement and knowledge of the community and how to affect change.

### **Situation:**

In 1989, the city of Superior and Douglas County area in northern Wisconsin was experiencing a declining economy and a crumbling infrastructure. At the same time, its aging population was increasing and young people were leaving the area searching for opportunities elsewhere. There was a need to develop young leaders who were committed to the long-term health of the area.

### **Response:**

Community leaders recognized these ominous warning signs and decided to take action through citizen involvement. Leadership Superior/Douglas County was born in 1992, and since that time more than 300 people have completed the 10-month program. Contributions of time and energy from community leaders and “Day Sponsorships” from local corporations, in combination with financial commitments from the Chamber of Commerce and the Development Association, make the effort possible. Staffers from UW-Superior’s Center for Continuing Education/Extension coordinate the training. Also, each participant pays a \$425 fee. Each year, 25 to 30 emerging and existing leaders who represent different occupations, ages and ethnicities are chosen to participate. Twelve full-day sessions are held over the course of an academic year. Sessions focus on leadership skill development, courts and law enforcement, education, government, growth management, business and economic development, and health and human services. Participants are strongly encouraged to attend “Superior Days,” an annual, region-wide lobbying effort that brings “Northerners” to Madison to meet with legislators and call attention to critical issues. Additionally, participants are expected to work in a small group to study a community issue of their choosing.

### **Impacts:**

The Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation funded an evaluation in 2003 to explore the value of Leadership Superior/Douglas County. Evaluators gathered information from interviews with key community stakeholders; from focus groups that included participants, sponsors, and day chairs; and sent a survey to every graduate of the program. In total, 146 people took part in the evaluation – about 50% of the program participants.

Participants say Leadership Superior/Douglas County influences the community:

- 91% of respondents said the program plays a key role in increasing civic participation.
- About 93% felt the program has an impact on the community.

The program has personal impact on the participants. Of the respondents:

- almost 90% feel more informed about public issues and where to get information about issues.
- nearly 80% said they have a better understanding of the public systems in the area and community dynamics.
- more than 70% said they are more informed about city and county decision making.
- 70% said they program improved their ability to affect decision making in their sphere of influence.
- more than 60% increased skills in group facilitation, listening, working as part of a team, expressing ideas, and/or identifying and assessing needs.

Participants used what they learned in the leadership program. Of the 104 survey respondents:

- 81% became more involved in leadership roles at church, work, or community.
- 72% reported joining a service or community organization.
- 61% reported becoming more involved in a community issue.
- 35% said they became a project leader or initiated a new project
- 11% ran for public office.

While several participants said they already had some leadership experience or skills before the training, they strengthened and broadened those skills and gained self-confidence. Some persons said the knowledge gained about the community was the most valuable.

**Success stories:**

“I have watched individuals step up and resume leadership roles in the private, public and nonprofit areas in our community. I believe past members, City Councilors and County Board members were more prepared after going through the program.”

“The program acts as a ‘seed bed’ or ‘farm system’ for civic organizations by bringing together individuals with leadership potential.”

“I serve on six boards now and before I didn’t serve on any.” “ I increased my connection to community stakeholders.”

“I became a more informed citizen and have the ability to discuss issues with the people directly involved in their outcome.”

“Each time I read a news report or watch a TV news release on area community events, a graduate of this program is involved in a positive way in the event.”

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