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The Role of Cornell University in Training Local Government Leaders

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Building Capacity by Training Local Government Officials

Cornell's Community and Rural Development Institute (CaRDI) views the training of local government officials as a key strategy to help New York communities meet their current challenges. Community and economic development in NYS in the 21st century requires educated leaders with the skills to develop and implement sustainable development strategies. Successful leaders foster strong networks and partnerships, pride of place, and solid citizen engagement. Skillful leaders know how to work with Federal and State government agencies and non-governmental entities in an era of enhanced regional collaboration. Additionally, municipalities benefit from policymakers who understand and can make the most of the interrelationships among issues.

CaRDI's local government training efforts are part of Cornell's commitment to serving New Yorkers through university-community linkages. CaRDI is committed to strengthening community leadership through an organized program of research-supported training, working in consort with Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE). The training programs for local officials help CCE implement its own overarching mission: improving the lives of New Yorkers by "putting scholarship and local knowledge to work."



Graduates of the Dennis A. Pelletier County Government Institute, a joint training program conducted by the NYS Association of Counties (NYSAC) and Cornell University.

Universities and Capacity Building for Community and Economic Development

Substantial literature on research universities' work with local government officials and community leaders demonstrates

that institutions of higher education are "uniquely qualified to discover and develop new knowledge; to fill knowledge gaps in their communities; to provide economic, social, cultural, and organizational trend analyses; to educate and train individuals; and to convene groups concerned about informed, rational discourse on issues of common concern."¹

"NYSAC and Cornell University have designed a comprehensive program for county elected and appointed officials, the Dennis A. Pelletier County Government Institute, that will make us all more knowledgeable of the issues and more prepared to engage in civil and constructive dialogue on the challenges we face."

—Stephen J. Acquario, NYSAC Executive Director

Universities can help elected and appointed officials by aligning research and outreach toward community and economic development. For example, Cornell University collaborates with municipal leaders to encourage new interdisciplinary efforts, foster innovation, and "grow" entrepreneurs. Current economic development research points to the importance of industry/governmental/institutional/educational "clusters" in promoting local development. This research highlights the importance of Cornell's and other universities' enhanced delivery systems that bring educational programs and research-based information to communities and to regions to support their development.

Nationally, Land Grant Universities and their affiliated state Cooperative Extension systems, increasingly provide training for public officials through the use of distance learning technologies. The Morrill Act of 1862, which established the land grant colleges and universities across the U.S., was a timely and effective economic development strategy for its time. Ron Seeber, Vice Provost for Cornell's Land Grant Affairs, describes Cornell's enduring land grant mission as creating and applying "knowledge with a public purpose." The training programs cover a wide range of topics and are geared not only to elected and appointed local officials, but also to municipal professional staff who provide leadership and technical know-how to their communities. Cooperative Extension systems

¹Walshok, M.L. 1997. Expanding Roles for Research Universities in Regional Economic Development. *New Direction for Higher Education*, no. 97, Spring 1997.

typically provide training to elected officials that enhance their understanding of their community dynamics, and the internal and external forces that affect them. Training sessions start with the reality that community issues are continually changing, frequently controversial, and often complex. Universally recognized “right” answers are rare; nor does “one” expert have all the answers.

Local Government Officials Seek Training

Cornell’s 2000 *Survey of New York Local Chief Elected Officials* indicated that an increasing number of local elected officials actively seek “training opportunities that address the skills and practices that are unique to leading a municipality, particularly practices and skills that improve performance” in overall management and policy formation.² The survey results also suggested the need for applied research to inform educational outreach in areas such as state aid and revenue reform, capital planning, economic development, planning and land use management, community strategic planning, and communication and leadership skills.

“For a long time, I have been an advocate for education – both for professional development and personal development. Education is one of those things that, once you acquire it, no one can take it away from you; that is why I call it an investment.”

–Eric Denk, graduate of the Cornell Municipal Clerks Institute, and Clerk of the Broome County Legislature

Offering training based on applied research can help communities face rapid and profound social and economic change, often with leaders who have relatively little governance experience. Leaders and public officials come from a variety of backgrounds and may not have had previous access to training related to their public roles. High turn-over among local leaders can adversely affect the effectiveness and continuity of public management. Training can mediate this problem because so many officials are part-time and lack formal training in governance.

Experience and research suggest that well-trained local government officials know how to use tools and resources to move their communities toward program implementation, benchmarking and evaluation. In essence, trained leaders are better at leveraging limited resources to help their communities achieve their goals. Communities that are effective in conducting such basic functions as fostering civic participation, data gathering and analysis, program implementation and evaluation also have a competitive advantage in applying for state and federal grants.

² Hattery, Michael. 2000 *Survey of New York’s Local Government Leaders: Policy Issues, Training Needs and Technology Use*. Management & Finance Report Series, Number 16. Cornell Local Government Program.

CaRDI’s Training Approaches

CaRDI responds to community leadership needs by providing a diverse and integrated portfolio of training opportunities to local government officials. Topics such as climate change, renewable energy, land use, and economic development receive a great deal of media attention, but these issues are intertwined and operate at multiple scales; a community or region cannot successfully consider them only as single or local issues.³

CaRDI’s approach to training promotes informed decision making, collaborative partnerships, and innovation.

Hallmarks are:

- Training based on applied research and analysis covering
 - Community dynamics
 - Historical, cultural, community contexts
 - Community economic base
 - The interplay between economic sectors
 - Interpretation and use of socio-economic and demographic data
- Collaboration with regional and state organizations and agencies
- Promotion of peer-to-peer/community-to-community learning and the exchange of best practices
- Support of mechanisms that enhance regional coordination and cooperation
- Building from community and regional assets

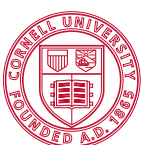
The importance of offering frameworks to help manage those interconnecting issues has become an important feature of CaRDI’s training. One of the frameworks that resonates with policymakers is the Total Development Paradigm, also known as the Layer Cake Model. This model underscores that community development is broader than economic or industrial development and both distinguishes and highlights the interdependence of various components, or layers, of communities.

It is not enough to offer training and expect that it will automatically increase the capacity of local leaders to improve their communities. More attention needs to be given to building support networks, and elucidating the interdisciplinary nature of community issues. CaRDI, as part of Cornell University and the land grant university network, is committed to developing new training models that are based on partnerships that will create platforms for bold and innovative strategies for livable communities and revitalized regions across New York State.

Note: Please visit CaRDI’s website for further information on the Cornell Municipal Clerks Institute, the Dennis A. Pelletier County Government Institute, and the Rural Learning Network of Central and Western New York.

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³ The need for integration across functional areas was a key theme that emerged from the Rural Vision Project CaRDI conducted in 2006, in collaboration with the NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources.



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