

V. Discussion

This evaluation has found that the SEPHLI program has contributed to the development of public health leaders. Many graduates described how the program influenced their self-awareness, confidence, interest in leadership, perspective on public health and leadership as collaborative endeavors, and commitment to staying in public health. Using concepts and skills taught in SEPHLI, graduates undertook leadership tasks such as collaborating and partnering, leading teams, supervising employees, and working with the media. Others described ways that SEPHLI improved their efforts to lead others, develop other leaders, and continue their education.

Many scholars reported using their new skills and perspectives to change a program, organization, system, or policy. These findings support the program's fundamental assumption that leadership development is one strategy for improving public health infrastructure. Commonly reported program changes involved providing additional services to the community, developing or improving training programs for employees, or serving new populations. Frequently reported organizational changes included developing or implementing new standard practices or tools to increase efficiency or performance. Systems changes involved new partnerships for a specific purpose, or in some cases a new set of relationships between departments or agencies. Less commonly, policy change and advocacy efforts were reported at local, state, and national levels.

Another major SEPHLI goal is to strengthen networks of public health leaders in the southeastern region. Assessing the achievement of this objective requires a bit more consideration. Many scholars expressed benefiting from knowledge shared by scholars from other states *during* the program. While many scholars also reported in quantitative questions exchanging knowledge and ideas with other graduates *after* the program, only a few scholars described instances of this in comments. In addition, very few scholars reported collaborating with other scholars on projects of mutual interest after graduation; though we did not explicitly ask about that practice, we would have expected to see more reports of this in questions about ongoing project work if it were occurring widely among graduates. Though the data about networking are not complete, we believe that knowledge-sharing and networking among SEPHLI graduates are not as common after the program as the program might hope for.

Many scholars, however, reported using more collaborative leadership approaches in their leadership projects and other work after the program. This may mean that through collaborative work after graduation, scholars deepen relationships with others in agencies, communities, and states, and that networks of leaders are strengthened in that indirect way.

A minority of scholars who reported that SEPHLI had little or no long-term influence on their leadership cited barriers related to their career stage (too experienced or close to retirement to make use of the content), position (too little time to commit to learning), organization (not open to change), or characteristics of the program. Some reported that lack of contact with other graduates or the program may have impeded their development in the long run.

Recommendations

Several ideas have been identified for the program to consider. Some suggestions pertain to opportunities for the current evaluator (one of the authors of this report) to strengthen assessment activities. These ideas are offered as constructive dialog, rather than criticism.

Clarity of Purpose

As is the case with most programs, there may be space to improve the clarity of the program's logic model and of its short-term and long-term objectives.

1. The program might articulate more clearly what the learners will be able to do after the program, and be sure that the program is geared to developing and offering learners opportunities to practice those skills. The objectives as stated could be made more measurable, and the program could have a regularly updated conceptual or logic model that makes more clear the short-term and long-term objectives. These objectives could be stated at the process level (e.g. how many scholars of what characteristics to enroll annually), short-term impact level (scholar learning, short-term project results), and long-term impact level (graduate actions in organizations, communities, states, or nationally and network-level results). Finally, the program should continue to update its logic model and objectives in response to national needs, as it has been doing.
2. The program might clarify the kinds of networks and network behaviors it seeks to develop during and after the program, and among whom – graduates of a single SEPHLI class, graduates of all SEPHLI classes, and/or SEPHLI graduates and other public health leaders in states, across the southeastern region, or nationally. Networks can be predominantly geared for knowledge-sharing, or they can be designed to facilitate collaboration around common concerns using task forces and working groups. Identifying which forms of networks are most desirable and feasible would help the program sharpen activities and perhaps identify partner organizations that could help, such as state public health associations, state or local agencies, or other training programs such as the National PHLI.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Faculty

1. The program might consider additional needs assessment research about the key problems that public health leaders are facing today, and about what skills and knowledge they believe they need to face these challenges. In prior work, public health professionals have been surveyed for their general needs but then benefited greatly from interviews with several about their daily challenges in certain skill areas. Case studies and exercises were then built that were grounded in daily realities of scholars. For example, it might be useful to seek to understand through interviews with leaders what “negotiation” and “team leadership” can and should look like in public health agencies.
2. One stakeholder suggested increasing the number of faculty that have had significant experience leading local or state agencies. While SEPHLI faculty get high marks from

scholars, many are consultants in particular topics (such as multi-rater feedback, teamwork, negotiation, or communication) rather than leaders with refined practical wisdom about (a) what are the most worthy goals for public health leaders and organizations to be pursuing?; (b) what are the best ways to reach these goals?; (c) what are the best ways to think enact the role of “leader” in a public health agency? (There is a term from Aristotle for this kind of practical wisdom or judgment about both ends and means: *phronesis*). Faculty members who have led organizations through changing political climates, movements, and shifting priorities will have developed deeply held points of view about what is most important and how to lead. They could lead discussions of case studies or simulations of complex situations leaders face, and help the participants recognize new ways of thinking about them. The program already uses such faculty but it is the evaluators’ impression that they make presentations around the margins of the program.

Certainly, the graduates who responded to the survey cited benefits from many of the skill development seminars. Therefore, the evaluators are not recommending dropping that material, but perhaps expanding deep reflection led by experienced leaders from public health, and possible from other sectors.

This recommendation is related to the concept that legitimate and important professional knowledge and wisdom are located among seasoned expert practitioners. The evaluators are not suggesting seasoned practitioners “lecture” to the students – attempting to codify their wisdom in bullet points on a slide - but rather engage with them in discussions of the perils and pains of leading in situations that cut across many topical lines. Another way of saying this is that in addition to teaching specific “competencies,” curricula in continuing education in a complex area like leadership should include opportunities to engage in deep reflection about the ambiguous “swamps” of practice in which one may not be sure what the real problems are, let alone how to address them (Schon, 1987).

Alumni Activities

1. The program might seek funding or find ways to improve alumni networking after the program. A major evaluation of the National Public Health Leadership Institute in 2007 found greater evidence of ongoing knowledge-sharing and collaboration, that is, sustained network development. This was partly because more questions were asked about ongoing voluntarism in that evaluation, but it may perhaps also be traced to the existence of the Public Health Leadership Society, an alumni society for graduates of that program. Its annual meetings and other learning opportunities allows graduates to stay in touch, discuss opportunities for collaboration, and form teams to work on issues of common concern. Study of resources on “communities of practice” might yield ideas that SEPHLI could use, if funding permitted (Briggs & Snyder, 2003).
2. The program might consider ways to link SEPHLI graduates with state or national public health associations so that graduates can find opportunities to collaborate with other leaders on issues of common concern. This study’s finding of few reports of ongoing collaboration after the program may be due in part to the fact that SEPHLI scholars work

on projects mainly as individuals, rather than in teams of scholars, and that many of these projects are focused on programmatic or organizational issues rather than statewide issues that might involve collaboration with many leaders. If SEPHLI could find ways to connect graduates to associations, or encourage graduates to get more involved in such associations, graduates' long-term impact on the field might be strengthened.

Target Audience and Recruiting

1. Some graduates reported that they had already been well-trained or had advanced leadership experiences before attending SEPHLI and that this minimized its value for them. Others reported that they had enrolled when they were close to retirement, which diminished the program's value. The program might want to consider ways to ensure that the scholars who enroll are not too advanced or ready to retire.

On the other hand, enrolling scholars who are very young and inexperienced may diminish the program's long-term networking results. First, scholars who are inexperienced might not have as much insight to share with other scholars during and after the program, making "knowledge-sharing" less valuable. In addition, such scholars may be less likely to be in a position to collaborate on issues of common interest in their states or nationally after graduation. Very early career scholars are more likely to be preoccupied with program or organizational responsibilities and not have the energy or attention to give to statewide or national collaboration.

2. Other learners reported having too little time to learn. If the program does not already do so, it might clarify the time requirements for the program and advise prospective scholars to avoid enrolling if their jobs or home lives were in particularly busy seasons.

Evaluation

1. Above, the evaluators recommended greater clarity about what is meant by leader development and professional networks. The evaluators wonder if the program would benefit from setting and evaluating itself against stronger outcome standards, such as the number of graduates who can report that they have influenced certain kinds of organizational changes, or participated in certain of network activities. While such measurable objectives are difficult to develop and to "teach toward" for complex and locally situated tasks like leadership, such standards might help lend added clarity to curriculum and instruction. Currently, it is difficult to judge whether results obtained in this evaluation are above, meeting, or below standards, because standards are not well defined for the results of leadership education in general or for SEPHLI in particular. The program has already defined standards for some results in its annually updated scorecard, which this evaluation has not discussed. The scorecard mainly reports about enrollment scholar satisfaction at graduation.

For example, the program could set a goal for a percentage of graduates who will influence public health policies by three years after graduation. With such an objective in

sight, the program would include workshops on ways to influence the policy process, and to emphasize this aspect of the leader's role.

2. As part of this evaluation, key informants were asked to talk about their impression of the value of this program for their state, and if possible, to give specific examples of benefits they have seen for people or organizations. It was difficult for these stakeholders to give specific examples of benefits, since they do not work closely with the people they recommend for the program. Since one of the key roles of evaluation is to continuously inform stakeholders about the value of a program, the program may wish to strengthen regular communication of results to the stakeholders. The program already has a quarterly newsletter that tells stories and provides data. Perhaps the stakeholders would also benefit from interpersonal communication combined with brief written reports, such as annual telephone conversations with key stakeholders in each state and at CDC in which staff share stories of impact, program updates and data, and receive suggestions.
3. The program may wish to examine more rigorously the reports from scholars' leadership projects to identify impacts on programs, organizations, systems, and policies as well as lessons learned about leadership, thereby using the reports as a short-term indicator of whether the program is meeting its objectives.
4. The program may wish to evaluate more carefully whether the program achieves its of network building objectives after the program is concluded, if resources permit. For example, are scholars continuing to share knowledge and/or collaborate with one another within or across SEPHLI classes? Have more scholars become involved with state public health associations and their working groups and task forces? Did contacts made or encouraged through SEPHLI increase these involvements, and how so? What are the implications of these findings for how the program encourages network development?

Other Recommendations

1. As a further incentive for organizations to enroll scholars, perhaps SEPHLI could establish links with the growing public health accreditation movement such that attendance at SEPHLI and other programs of its kind would help an organization become accredited. It would even be possible to teach topics that pertain to organizational quality and performance improvement for all scholars or as electives. One scholar, a local health director, made this connection, stating that SEPHLI is "critical - a must have program especially with accreditation on the way."
2. Another concept that the program might consider is having an advisory group of senior stakeholders in participating states. This group would not only receive annual evaluation updates, but also hear about all program news and advise the program on curriculum, scholar recruitment, and funding.

Limitations of this Study

Limitations of this study include the following:

1. The study had no comparison group that did not receive the training to compare with those who did. In addition, there were no pre-post measurements to compare graduates' knowledge and skill levels at the end of the program to where they were at the beginning. These design problems make it more difficult to measure changes due to the program and to attribute any reported changes to the program. Scholars were asked to report changes that they believe the program caused, and in some of the open-ended questions, asking scholars to report how the program contributed to the changes they report. As noted in the Methods section, it is believed that learners' statements of program effects have some validity because:
 - a. The effects they report pertain directly to concepts and skills that the program teaches, and often flow out of specific seminars or assignments, including the applied learning project.
 - b. The changes they report come after they participated in the program and in some cases are verifiable from other sources, such as program and organizational changes, and many scholars were willing to give their names in case more information about the changes they were reporting was needed.
 - c. Scholars are not claiming that SEPHLI was the sole cause of any of the outcomes they are reporting, but only that SEPHLI contributed to these outcomes. Outside of a laboratory, in the complexity of the social world, asking whether a program caused a change is less realistic than asking whether the program made some contributions to changes that occurred.
 - d. The changes that graduates report seem realistic given that SEPHLI is a year-long experience with many mutually reinforcing learning methods, and they are in line with evaluations of other leadership programs (Umble et al., 2007).
2. The evaluation relies on graduates' self-reported gains, and has not asked for any confirmation of those gains from colleagues or supervisors. With a limited budget, the evaluators chose to survey all graduates, rather than do in-depth case studies of a few, which would have collected data from others who could comment on changes in the graduates' performance. Perhaps future studies should move in that direction.
3. Partly due to a problem in question design, many graduates described a change they had worked to achieve in a program or organization, but did not explain how SEPHLI contributed (e.g. increasing the leader's knowledge or skill). In future evaluations the evaluators will make sure that the survey is clearer in asking for such information.
4. This evaluation did not summarize previous annual evaluations, nor did it examine other sources of evidence about program effects such as leadership project reports.
5. The return rate of 65% is generally acceptable for on-line surveys and in line with other similar studies. More returned surveys, however, would ensure that the responses represent the entire population of graduates.
6. The evaluators supplemented the survey with interviews with key informants in several states, but due to time limitations, did not talk with key informants in all

program states. More key informant interviewees from more states would give a better sense of their perspectives on the program.

In Closing

This evaluation has provided evidence that SEPHLI helps leaders develop their perspectives and leadership abilities, and that these leaders are using what they gained to improve public health programs, organizations, systems, and in some cases, policies. Some leaders also reported that they benefited from the improved knowledge-sharing networks that SEPHLI facilitated. Stakeholders believe that SEPHLI should continue and that it provides an important learning resource that the states do not provide through other programs.

This evaluation has made several recommendations to help the program strengthen and measure its outcomes. Recurrent evaluation should help SEPHLI continue to improve and report its benefits for leaders, networks, and infrastructure. It is hoped that this evaluation provides insights about the effects of this program and assists the wider field of leadership development in its quest to improve the public's health.