

Aligning Land Grant Leadership Programs with the Needs of Elected Officials through Extension: Perceptions, Priorities, and Participation among Florida County Commissioners

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Abstract

Addressing complex challenges has become the norm for local elected officials, and the need for skilled leadership at the local level has never been greater. County commissioners are not only tasked with day-to-day county management but must also make crucial decisions on issues such as pandemic response, rapid population growth, and natural disasters. The purpose of our study is to assess a university-based leadership development program for county commissioners, offered in collaboration between Extension at the University of Florida and the Florida Institute for County Government. We explore attitudes toward leadership programs among Florida county commissioners, show which competencies commissioners prioritize for leadership development, and identify potential barriers to participation. We find that county commissioners believe that leadership programs improve the effectiveness of leaders and the quality of local government. Additionally, we discover that the highest priority leadership competencies are strategic planning, communication, economic trends, conflict resolution, and critical thinking. Finally, our study shows that universities that partner with county government associations to offer leadership programs can create an important avenue for rural, resource-constrained counties to build the capacity of elected officials.

Article History

Received: April 28, 2023

Accepted: August 10, 2023

Published: September 10, 2023

Keywords

leadership program evaluation;
community leadership development;
community capacity building;
leadership education

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Florida is home to 22 million people within its 67 counties, with conservative estimates suggesting that the state's population will grow by 900 new citizens each day (Office of Economic & Demographic Research, 2019). Florida's population continues to transition to urban areas, while at the same time wicked agricultural and environmental issues are emerging (Florida State University, 2010). For example, citrus greening, a plant disease introduced to Florida in 2005, is responsible for over \$1 billion in annual damages and threatens the sustainability of the citrus industry in the region (Li et al., 2020).

County commissioners are the front line of community leadership (McKee et al., 2016) and often "find themselves overwhelmed at the number and scope of decisions they must make and the criticism expressed by their constituency" (Rinehart & Smith, 1995, p. 2). Florida's changing landscape necessitates that local leaders adapt to face new challenges and possess the capacity to lead their communities into the future. Leadership programs available through Extension at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF|IFAS) are essential for local government leaders to be knowledgeable, systems thinkers, and responsive to human and environmental issues that affect food, agricultural, and natural resources systems locally.

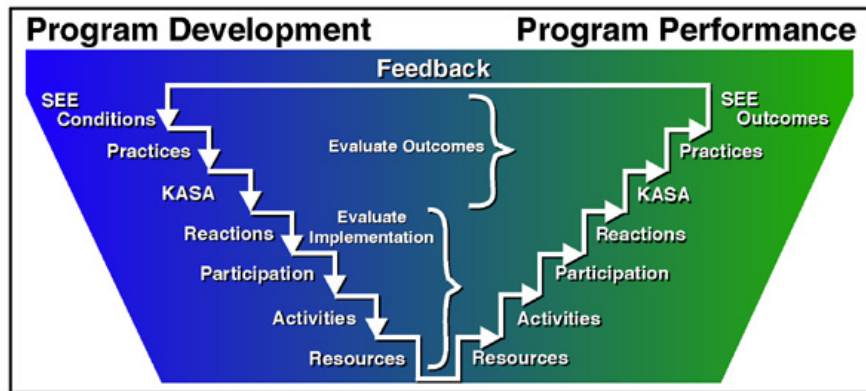
As part of an ongoing evaluation of attitudes and access to leadership programs, we conducted a survey of county commissioners attending the Florida Association of Counties 2022 Legislative Conference. Our goals were to gauge attitudes toward leadership programs among Florida county commissioners, uncover which competencies commissioners would like to prioritize for development, and identify potential barriers to participation in the Institute for County Government (ICG) leadership programs. We also investigated access to the leadership programs among commissioners from rural, resource-constrained counties.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the study is based on the Targeting Outcomes of Program (TOP) Model (Rockwell & Bennett, 2004), provided in Figure 1, which was developed from Bennett's Hierarchy (Bennett, 1975). In the TOP Model, the seven levels of Bennett's Hierarchy inform program development and program performance. The TOP Model provided a robust framework to assess the evolving needs of commissioners and provided avenues to refine the leadership programs to address these needs. Specifically, the survey gathered information on the attitudes, skills, and aspirations of commissioners (TOP model level 3) and examined leadership program graduation data to examine participation (TOP model level 5). The use of the TOP Model was ideal to both gain the necessary feedback to create positive change and to provide data to share with other programs with similar objectives.

Figure 1

The TOP Model (Rockwell & Bennett, 2004)



Partnership with the Institute for County Government

In 1996, UF|IFAS Extension formed a partnership with the ICG, which aids county commissioners in their personal and professional development. The goals of leadership programs are threefold. First, the programs look to build leadership capacity. Next, these programs supply the skills to “initiate change and increase human capital” (McKee et al., 2016, p. 202). Finally, “these programs give participants an overview of other related issues such as the environment, interpersonal relationships, the political system, and urban interface” (McKee, et al., 2016, p. 202). Currently, the ICG and UF|IFAS Extension offer three programs:

- *The Certified County Commissioner program (CCC)*— “is a voluntary program of study designed for county commissioners to learn information and enhance skills relevant to their duties and responsibilities. Courses are taught by a team of experts, which includes university faculty, government officials, professional speakers, Florida Association of Counties members and Florida Association of Counties staff” (Florida Institute for County Government, 2023c).
- *The Advanced County Commissioner program I (ACC I)*— is an advanced leadership program designed for graduates of the CCC program. The content focuses on introductory-level leadership competencies like increasing self-awareness and decision making and strategic planning to aid commissioners in bringing positive change to leaders’ counties (Florida Association of Counties, 2023).
- *The Advanced County Commissioner program II (ACC II)*— builds off the outcomes of the CCC and ACC I programs, providing context to the issues each commissioner is addressing in their counties. Both contextual expertise and leadership skills are addressed to help commissioners gain new perspectives on complex issues across Florida (Florida Association of Counties, 2023).

The programs are well attended, and, as of 2020, the CCC program has 482 graduates, the ACC I program has 259 graduates, and the new level, the ACC II program, reached full attendance at 20 commissioners (Florida Institute for County Government, 2023a). Each program takes one year to complete, and costs range from up to \$1750 for CCC and \$450 for ACC I and II.

Purpose

The purpose of our study is to determine attitudes toward leadership programs among Florida county commissioners. Additionally, the study identifies which leadership skills commissioners prioritize in leadership development programs. Finally, the study addresses the impact that potential barriers have on participation in the ICG leadership programs, specifically whether commissioners from rural, resource-constrained counties have similar access to the ICG leadership programs as counties without this barrier. We identify rural, resource-constrained counties using the definition for fiscally constrained counties under Florida Statute § 218.67 (2022). Fiscally constrained counties are rural and have limited revenue-raising capacity. We focus on fiscally constrained counties because these counties have a strong need for quality leadership yet lack the internal resources to provide it. Out of 67 Florida counties, 29 (~43%) are designated as fiscally constrained.

Methods

We distributed 120 surveys during a lunch session to county commissioners attending the 2022 Florida Association of Counties Legislative Conference. Our eight-question survey asked commissioners their county¹, how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements pertaining to the importance and effectiveness of leadership development programs, which leadership competencies they prioritized for development, and to identify barriers to participation. Competencies were pulled from the course subjects taught in the CCC, ACC I, and ACC II curriculum. These competencies are often taught in multiple programs and at varying levels. We followed the best practices for survey design found in Dillman et al. (2014). A copy of the survey is available in the appendix.

Fifty-two surveys were returned for a response rate of 43.3%. To determine the representativeness of our sample, we used data provided by the ICG from the year 2022 on the current population of Florida county commissioners (Florida Institute for County Government, 2022). As seen in Table 1, our sample composition is similar to the population with respect to the proportion of commissioners from rural and fiscally constrained counties. We note that graduates from the programs are overrepresented in our sample. County commissioners who have already taken part in the programs may perceive leadership education more favorably, potentially biasing our results in a positive direction. Because we relied on a convenience sample of commissioners attending the conference, we do not generalize our results beyond the respondents.

¹ For the purpose of identifying commissioners representing fiscally constrained counties

Table 2*Composition of our sample vs. the population of Florida county commissioners in 2022*

	Sample (n = 52)	Population (N =374)
Number of counties represented	31	67
From rural county	40.3%	42.5%
From fiscally constrained county	32.7%	38.5%
CCC graduates	59.6%	37.4%
ACC I graduates	46.2%	25.7%
ACC II graduates	26.9%	9.4%

Note. Data on the current population of county commissioners was obtained from ICG (Florida Institute for County Government, 2022).

In addition to analyzing survey data, we used secondary data on graduation² from the ICG leadership programs to examine whether access differed for commissioners from fiscally constrained and non-constrained counties (Florida Institute for County Government, 2023b). First, we compared two time series depicting the number of graduates from fiscally constrained and non-fiscally constrained counties. Second, we compared the proportion of fiscally constrained and non-fiscally constrained commissioners holding office in 2022 and are graduates from each leadership program. The data spans from 2007 to 2022 and includes the number of graduates, the county that each commissioner represents, and the graduation year.

Findings

Attitudes Toward Leadership Education

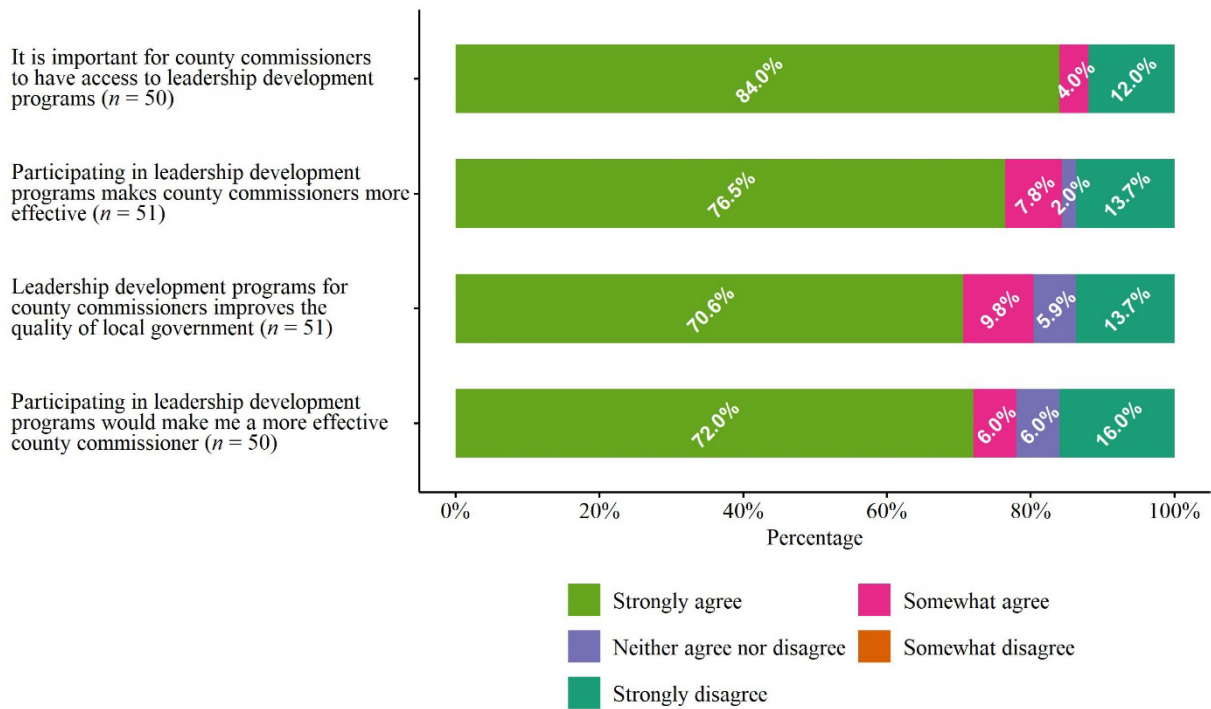
We first asked county commissioners whether they were aware of the leadership programs offered by ICG. Of our sample, ~90% were aware of the ICG leadership certifications, indicating that the program is well-known. Next, we asked how much they agree on a 5-point Likert scale with four statements related to the importance of access to programs and whether such programs improve local government. We found high levels of agreement with all four statements, as shown in Figure 2. Interestingly, while ~84% of our sample strongly agreed or

²Access is typically investigated using enrollment and applicant pool data (see Castleman & Long, 2016). However, using enrollment data is inappropriate in the context of the ICG leadership programs because all commissioners are automatically enrolled in the Certified County Commissioner program upon election. Further, when a commissioner completes a leadership program, they are automatically enrolled in the next program tier. Although there are limitations when using graduation data to investigate access (e.g., we do not observe commissioners that participate but do not graduate from the programs), it is the best data available and can still provide valuable insight. For example, if we find that a smaller proportion of commissioners from fiscally constrained counties are program graduates compared to non-fiscally constrained counties, this may indicate that fiscally constrained counties have less access to the programs, potentially due to a lack of resources, and more effort can be directed towards increasing participation among fiscally constrained commissioners.

somewhat agreed that participation in leadership programs makes county commissioners more effective, only ~78% strongly or somewhat agreed that taking part in leadership programs would make themselves more effective.

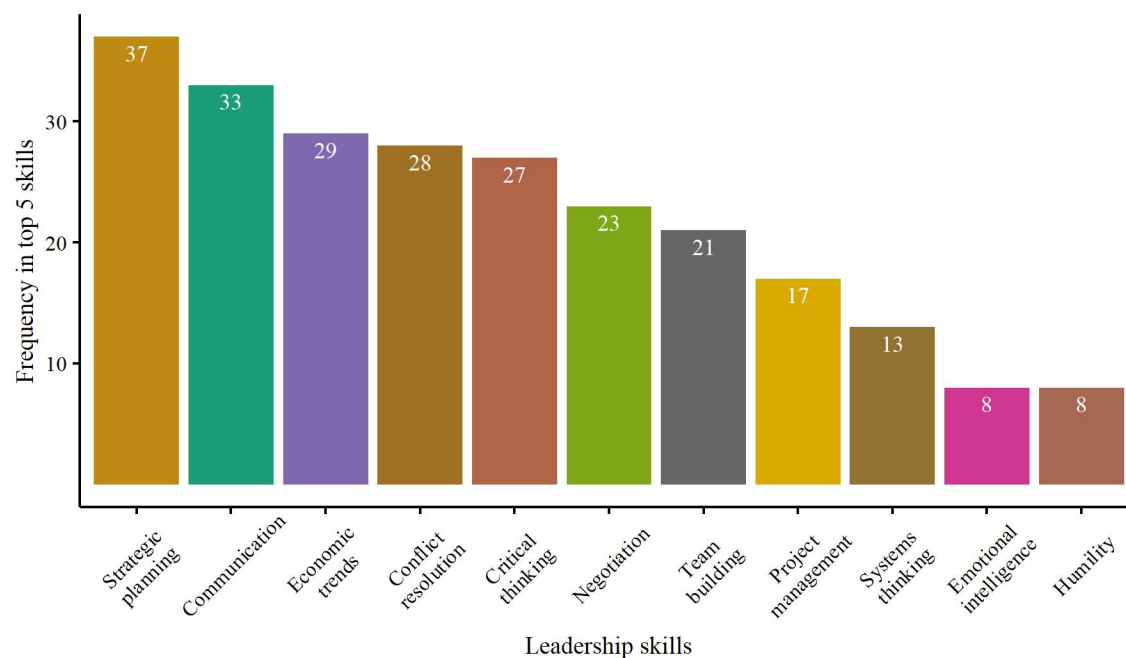
Figure 2

County commissioner attitudes toward ICG leadership development programs



Prioritization of Topics for Leadership Development

We asked county commissioners to identify the five most important competencies in which they would like further development. Figure 3 shows that the top five most frequently selected competencies were strategic planning, communication, economic trends in Florida, conflict resolution, and critical thinking. We also asked county commissioners whether there were any skills or topics that were not included in our list. The open responses fell into the following categories: change management, root cause analysis, statutory duties of county commissioners, county budgeting and finance, bridge building, time-management, public speaking, writing, and trust building.

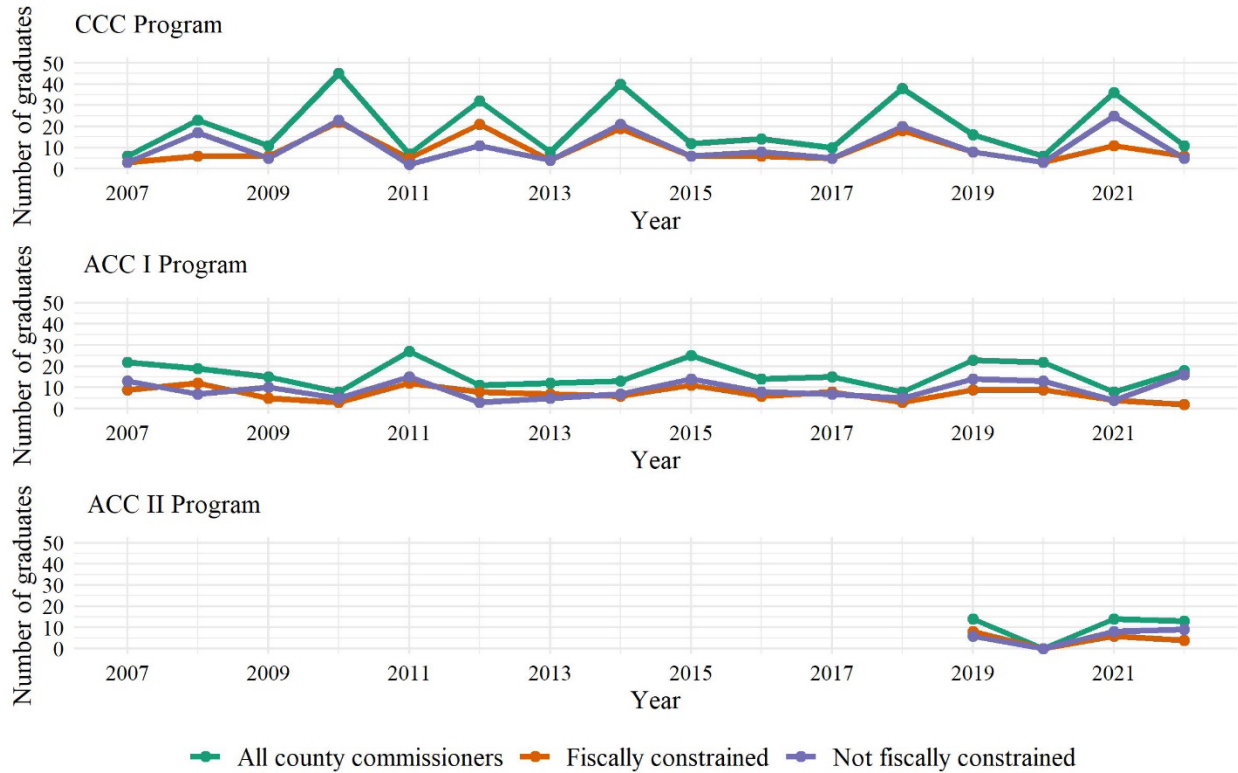
Figure 3*Prioritization of competencies by county commissioners***Access to Leadership Education Programs**

Commissioners were asked in an open-ended question to name any barriers to participation. Only ten respondents identified barriers, nine of which related to time and scheduling and one that related to digital learning. While the CCC program shifted to being taught virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic and is likely to continue as an online program, ACC I and II have resumed sessions taught in-person.

In addition to analyzing primary data, we used secondary data from ICG to compare the number of commissioners representing fiscally constrained counties who graduated from the leadership programs to commissioners representing non-fiscally constrained counties (Florida Institute for County Government, 2023b). The data spans from 2007 to 2022 and includes the number of graduates, the county a commissioner represents, and the graduation year. Our visualization of graduation from the ICG leadership education programs, presented in Figure 4, shows that enrollment in CCC and ACC I is cyclical, likely due to election cycles and term lengths, creating larger “freshman” classes of county commissioners in certain years. Figure 3 also shows that graduation from fiscally constrained counties is comparable to graduation from non-fiscally constrained counties throughout the study period. Although limited data is available on graduation from ACC II since the launch of the program in 2019, the short series follows a similar pattern.

Figure 4

Graduation from ICG leadership programs among county commissioners 2007–2022



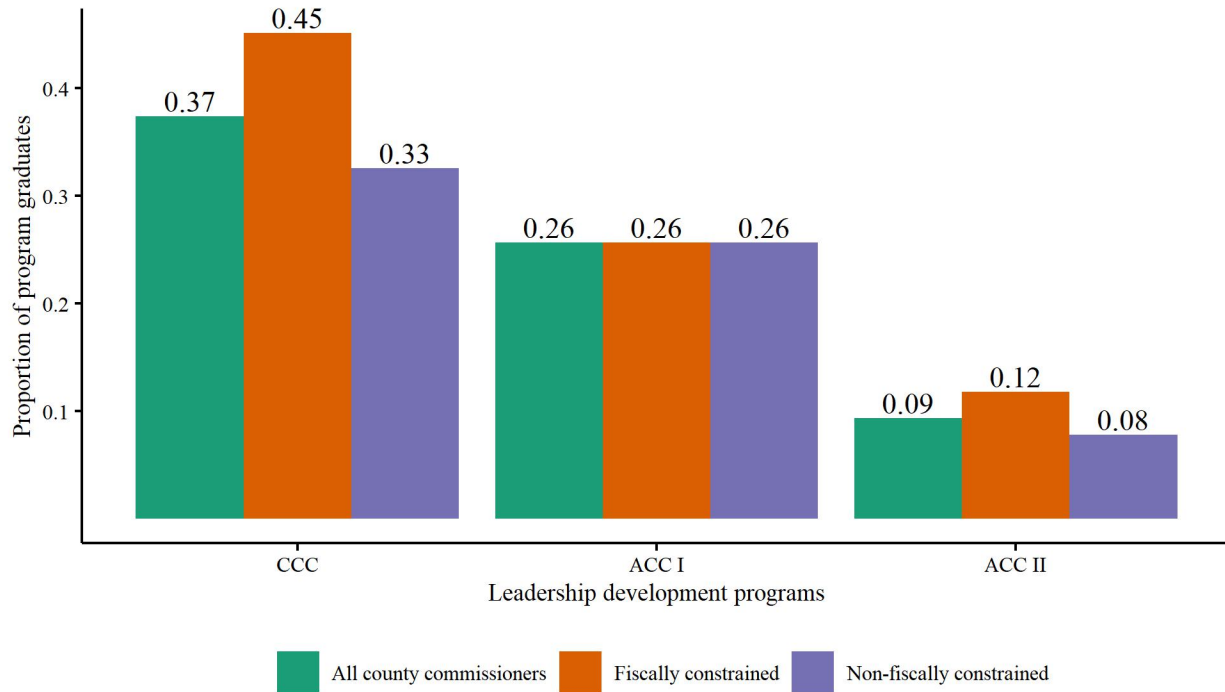
Note. The ACC II program was launched in 2019 and had no graduates in 2020 because the class schedule was changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in the 2020 class graduating in August 2021. Data provided by the ICG (Florida Institute for County Government, 2023b).

As a final check, we used data on all county commissioners holding office in 2022 to compare the proportion of leadership-program graduates from fiscally-constrained and non-fiscally-constrained counties. An examination of the proportions provides added insight into how much graduates of the program make up the total population of county commissioners as well as the population from each county type. The results are presented in Figure 5 and show that the proportion of commissioners from fiscally constrained counties who were graduates of the programs is equal or higher than the proportion of commissioners from non-fiscally constrained counties. A test of equal proportions³ revealed no differences between the groups for the ACC I and ACC II programs. However, for the CCC program, the test indicated that the proportion of fiscally constrained commissioners is significantly larger ($\chi^2 = 5.414, p = 0.019$). Taken together, the graphical evidence and the test of equal proportions suggest that fiscally-constrained county commissioners have comparable access to ICG’s leadership programs.

³The null hypothesis of this test is that the proportions of the two groups are the same.

Figure 5

Percent of program graduates among 2022 Florida county commissioners



Note. Data provided by the ICG (2022).

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

Through Extension, we have opportunities to convey crucial context and skills to county commissioners, who, with their power to zone, budget, and plan future development, make regular decisions that have substantial implications for local agricultural and environmental systems. Our study gauges the attitudes of commissioners toward leadership programs, uncovers the top priority competencies as well as barriers to participation, and investigates access to the programs among commissioners from rural, resource-constrained counties.

Regarding attitudes, we find strong agreement among commissioners that access to leadership programs is important and that these programs improve local government. The positive perceptions found within our sample is an important step towards demonstrating that the programs have strong buy-in from the target audience. A key takeaway is that Extension professionals with a thorough understanding of leadership education can provide a value-added resource in the form of leadership development to local elected officials.

All five of the top-ranked competencies are taught throughout ACC I and II, indicating that the leadership programs are well-aligned with the priorities of Florida county commissioners. The

top-ranked items include a blend of skills and context-focused topics. It is no surprise that county commissioners ranked the competencies in this order. Due to the nature of their job, the top competencies (e.g., strategic planning and communication) are related to “Problem Solving Skills” (Mumford et al., 2000). Other skills (e.g., humility and emotional intelligence) associated with “Social Judgement Skills” fall further down the list most likely due to commissioners’ beliefs they already possess the competencies that help leaders understand people and work in social systems (Mumford et al., 2000). Our results suggest that Extension-based leadership development programs can address two important needs: (a) develop the core competencies most needed by local leadership, and (b) serve as a trusted information source on topics important to decision making. Insight from our competency rankings can be used by Extension specialists to design and improve their own programs. However, context plays a critical role in leadership development, and competency rankings may change based upon commissioners’ needs. Future research could collect and compare competency rankings across different programs to establish a national Extension leadership development resource.

Given that the goal of the county commissioner leadership development programs is to build the capacity of local elected officials in all counties, access is an especially important consideration. We analyze whether fiscally constrained counties, which tend to be rural and resource constrained, have access comparable to that of non-fiscally-constrained counties. We find no substantial difference in terms of historical graduation numbers and the proportion of 2022 commissioners who are graduates of each program. Additionally, while a few commissioners from both types of counties identified time and scheduling as barriers to participation, responses from fiscally constrained and non-fiscally constrained counties were indistinguishable. Taken together, the evidence from our sample does not indicate that fiscally constrained counties are disproportionately affected by barriers to the programs.

Our examination of the leadership programs administered by ICG and Extension presents the results from a single state, and future research should consider the perceptions, priorities, and participation of elected officials towards leadership programs in other contexts to supply more insight. Additionally, though the goal of these leadership programs is to build the capacity of local communities, there is little empirical research that links participation to economic or social outcomes. Such studies would supply valuable insight into whether leadership programs can effect change at the community level.

Acknowledgements

We thank Becky Berentsen and Eric Poole at Institute for County Government for their support and assistance with our study. Author Contributions: **N. Palardy** – conceptualizations, formal analysis, investigation, writing-original draft; **M. Sowcik** – conceptualization, investigation, writing-review and editing.

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