

LeadAR: Strengthening Arkansas communities since 1984

By Dr. Julie Robinson

For nearly 40 years, Arkansans from all walks of life have participated in the two-year LeadAR program to sharpen their skills, expand their worldview and put their hopes into action to aid their communities. LeadAR can be traced to a 1980 fact-finding trip by two University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service agents, J.B. Williams—state leader, community development—and Thomas Vaughns, horticulture specialist for the University of Arkansas Pine Bluff. Along with representatives from 41 other states, they learned about a leadership training program initiated by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Impressed by what they heard, the two submitted a proposal, and the Foundation provided the original funding that would establish LeadAR. The program took root and Class 1 began its journey in March 1984.

LeadAR graduates are everywhere serving their communities in every conceivable way. They are educators, farmers, advocates, bankers, state legislators, lawyers, mayors, as well as quorum court, city council and school board members. Their influence spans industry, education, government, nonprofits and small businesses. In almost 40 years of training, the program has developed a tremendous legacy with more than 500 alumni who will influence the state's future for decades to come.

To address the gaps between rural and urban communities within the state, LeadAR recruits talented and passionate people eager to usher in positive change. Designed to broaden Arkansans' understanding of critical issues and opportunities facing our state, LeadAR strengthens participants' knowledge, skills and network by empowering them to impact communities and advocate for long-term economic development.

The LeadAR model employs an interdisciplinary approach to leadership development by championing the intersection of theory, practice and application. While exploring the major issues facing Arkansas communities is key to achieving lasting change, LeadAR recognizes this is not enough. Experts in subject matter, leadership theory, communication techniques, experiential learning and critical thinking are involved in LeadAR training. This knowledge equips participants with the tools necessary to catalyze change using strategies that are equitable, empowering and sustainable.



IMAGE COURTESY LEADAR

For nearly 40 years, LeadAR participants have traveled around the state, country and world to deepen their understanding of critical issues, policy impacts and best practices to become better citizens and leaders in their communities.

LeadAR is for Arkansans from rural and urban parts of our state who want to assume greater leadership responsibilities to better understand complex cultural, social and economic issues impacting us today and in the future. The results are legion: Participants improve their ability to interact and work with others; deepen their understanding of social, economic and political systems; and develop critical thinking and decision-making skills to become better citizens and leaders. One of the greatest values of the LeadAR experience is the

opportunity to connect to people and resources that can help them make a difference. “LeadAR for me was not a beginning nor was it a destination,” said Rep. David Hillman, who represents District 13 in the Arkansas House of Representatives and is a LeadAR Class 1 alumnus. “It was, however, an experience that opened a whole new world of possibilities.”

LeadAR is an intensive 18-month, hands-on program. Class members participate in seven multi-day seminars around the state that include tours, guest speakers and interactive activities. Video-conference sessions are hosted during alternating months when the class does not meet in person. Part of what makes LeadAR unique from other leadership development programs are the National Study Tour, International Study Tour and Leadership Service Project completion. Class members participate in the National Study Tour in the first year of the program, where they travel to Washington, D.C., to learn about issues and policymaking from a national perspective. At the end of the LeadAR program, participants travel outside the United States for the International Study Tour to learn how international issues and policy impact Arkansas and the U.S. Finally, participants are required to complete

a Leadership Service Project over the course of the 18-month program. The Leadership Service Project makes a positive difference in each community involved while providing an opportunity for participants to apply their newly acquired skills and newly made connections.

Applications for LeadAR Class 20 are now open. Applicants are required to apply online no later than February 24, 2023. All applicants will be required to participate in an interview. Applicants will be notified of Class 20 selection status by March 31, 2023.

Tuition for participating in LeadAR is \$3,500. Costs for tuition remain affordable through the support of the Arkansas Association of LeadAR Alumni, alumni contributions and our Eagle Sponsors: Electric Cooperatives of Arkansas, Farm Credit and Arkansas Farm Bureau. All program information and the application can be found at www.uaex.uada.edu/leadar.



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