

The State of Leadership in Greater Grand Rapids  
An Environmental Scan: Are we making a difference?

# **Acknowledgements**

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## THE CHALLENGE

Strong leaders are critical to the health of every community, organization and grassroots effort. Greater Grand Rapids has enjoyed strong leadership for many years, which has successfully attracted new businesses, infrastructure and residents to the area. The Grand Rapids/Kent County area has continued to grow at a time when many communities in Michigan have lost residents. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Kent County has grown by almost 15 percent over the prior 10 years to its current population of 590,417. The growth for the State of Michigan over the same period was just under 7 percent. Current projections show that the County's population will grow to an estimated 607,300 in 2010. This rapid and consistent growth has brought significant change to the area.

As the demographics of the community continue to shift, it has become clear that the leadership of the community is not reflecting those changes. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 51 percent of the population of the City of Grand Rapids is female; just over 20 percent of citizens in the city report a disability. The African American population has grown to 20 percent and the Latino population makes up 13 percent of the community. There are 34,026 young people between the ages of 15 and 24; an additional 17 percent of the population is between the ages of 25 and 34 – a total of 34 percent of the population. Grand Rapids' Caucasian population decreased almost 13 percent between the 1990 and 2000 censuses. Meanwhile African-American, Asian or Pacific Islander and Hispanic populations increased drastically within the city at roughly 15 percent, 57 percent and 175 percent respectively. According to a report from the Dyer-Ives Foundation, *New Neighbors, New Opportunities: Immigrants and Refugees in Grand Rapids*, more than 10 percent of the City's population was born outside the United States. This report also states that "the Grand Rapids metropolitan area is one of 50 'new Latino destinations' in the U.S." Grand Rapids – and West Michigan – is changing. Despite these changes, the leaders of greater Grand Rapids have a tendency to represent 'the usual suspects' — mostly white, mostly male, middle-aged and beyond, mostly well connected and well known in the community.

Leaders often shape the current and future state of a community, so it is important to gauge whether Grand Rapids is doing enough to develop leadership skills and potential in this diverse community. We should reflect on what other communities are doing; how Grand Rapids leadership development programs are working together. What can we do better with what we already have? What barriers exist to participation in leadership development and leadership positions? Who is missing from community decision making? How do we reach out further into the community? And perhaps most importantly, what can be done to better support current and emerging leaders?

## **BACKGROUND**

“Project Connect” is a collaborative effort by several community organizations to gather information about current leadership initiatives and to conceive new ways to develop and support emerging leaders from marginalized communities, such as people living with disability, people of color, women, youth and people with lower incomes. The collaborating organizations include the Community Leadership Institute of Aquinas College; Disability Advocates of Kent County, Fishladder Inc., Leadership Grand Rapids, Project Blueprint of the United Way, and the Woodrick Institute for the Study of Racism & Diversity.

Together, these collaborating partners form an extensive network of program participants. The Community Leadership Institute, now closed, focused on leadership development in both academic and community settings, from grassroots organizers to non-profit executive directors. More than 2,500 people with physical or mental disabilities (and/or family members) annually contact Disability Advocates for information, assistance and resources. Fishladder Inc. provides corporate and personal development training to hundreds of participants at corporations, non-profits and educational institutions. More than 1,000 professionals have graduated from Leadership Grand Rapids and Inside Grand Rapids programs since 1986. Project Blueprint has graduated more than 500 racial and ethnic minorities from its board training program. The Woodrick Institute has conducted Institutes for Healing Racism workshops for more than 750 citizens in greater Grand Rapids.

The first effort of Project Connect was an environmental scan, undertaken to provide a foundation of information and data to inform subsequent planning and action regarding leadership development. The resultant data and information included in this report responds to questions and highlights existing or emerging issues about the present and future state of leadership in Grand Rapids. This report from the environmental scan is meant to help develop a common perception and to identify strengths, weaknesses, trends and conditions of the community, including honest and open responses from both experienced and emerging leaders. The report is divided into two sections, discussing the State of Leadership and the State of Leadership Development in Grand Rapids.

A second document, *Best Practices – Developing and Supporting Emerging Leaders*, focusing on emerging or nontraditional leaders from marginalized communities, is attached.

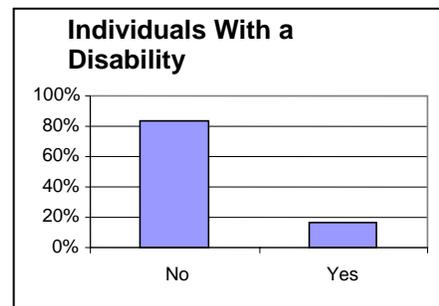
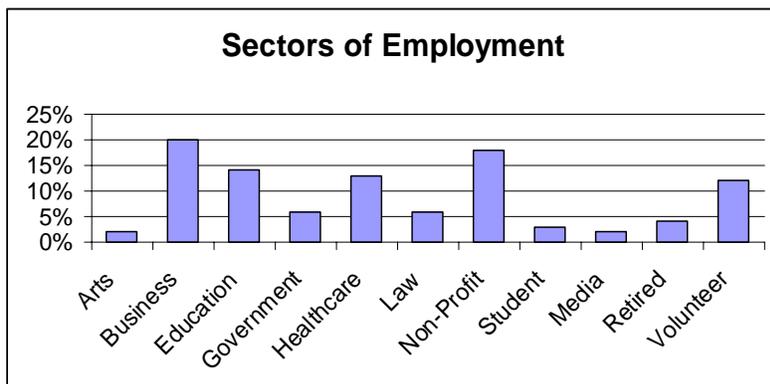
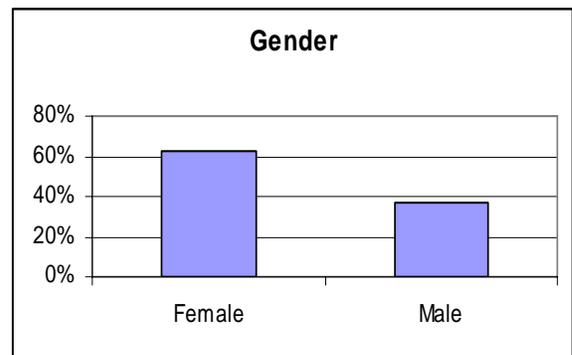
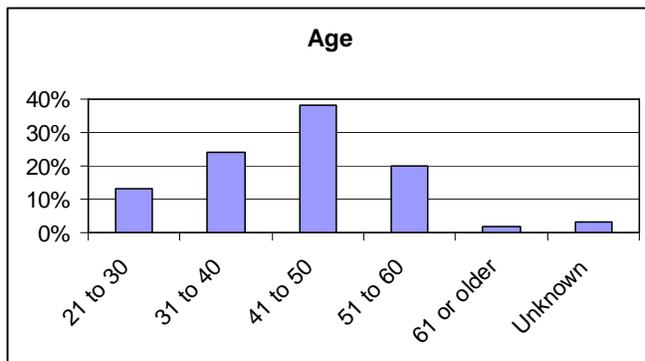
**METHODOLOGY & PROCESS:**

In its report, the collaborative assesses how people in the greater Grand Rapids community understand leadership and how they have come into leadership. Further, the collaboration evaluates how this community develops leaders and how individuals relate to current leaders. Toward this end, the collaborative convened focus groups to discuss issues and developed exercises through which participants defined leadership and differentiated (if applicable) leadership in Grand Rapids. Participants also shared their experiences and/or ability to access current leaders, community resources and leadership positions in greater Grand Rapids. They evaluated current leadership development opportunities in the community, shared what was critical to their development and identified any strengths or weaknesses in local leadership development programs.

The collaborative asked the following questions in focus group discussions among participants:

- Are Grand Rapids leaders strengthening the community?
- Is leadership and initiative expected of everyone in Grand Rapids?
- Do the people of Grand Rapids make choices about the community together?
- What kind of relationship do local leaders have with the people of Grand Rapids?
- Why are people in Grand Rapids willing to lead or become leaders?

Data for this report were collected by reviewing documents, conducting 18 focus groups (from partner organizations’ networks) targeting 95 traditional and nontraditional leaders, and surveying focus group participants. This report directly reflects the discussions held and includes comments from the participants. This is their story of leadership in Grand Rapids. The age, gender, employment and disability status of the focus group participants is charted below:



## STATE OF LEADERSHIP IN GRAND RAPIDS

### Leaders Strengthening the Community

Responses to the question, “are Grand Rapids’ leaders strengthening the community,” were evenly divided. Those who believe that Grand Rapids’ leaders are strengthening the community cited efforts such as those made by the Mayor’s office, the Master Plan, Delta Strategy, the Grand Rapids Public Schools, the Chamber of Commerce and the downtown revitalization. Some participants mentioned collaboration as one of the community’s most effective traits, while one person commended Grand Rapids’ leaders for being “willing to look at new models to address long term issues.” One participant stated that “there is a realization that change is coming and that it should be embraced rather than resisted” even though “the future remains uncertain.” Another participant saw improvement over the years, because “every year, the community is blessed with new leaders that come forward to drive a new or existing program.” While focus group participants saw value in the work of the leaders, most were quick to add that more needs to happen, locally and regionally, with more community buy-in. Many people felt that Grand Rapids is not open to too much change, too quickly. Others believed that there are too few people involved in leadership and that they are often the same individuals.

Those who believe that Grand Rapids’ leaders are not strengthening the community are frustrated with leaders who don’t reside in the City of Grand Rapids or don’t have children in the public schools. They wonder how these leaders can truly understand what needs to be done when they are on the outside looking in because “people are not vested in what they are not committed to.” One woman shared her experience of sitting on a board of directors that had diverse representation “but there was no diversity of thinking and there was no one from the community, who lived up the street, who used that community, based in there.” Others worry about the “very clearly demarcated groups of ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ in Grand Rapids” and believe that the community is “increasingly segregated, racially and economically.” They wonder if part of the community is being forgotten or overlooked by our leaders.

Ten percent of the participants responded ‘yes and no’ when asked this question because they believe leaders are strengthening only parts of the community. One participant said that while the infrastructure of the community is being built up nicely he worries about the human community. Another echoed that concern, saying there is “perhaps too little investment in people.” Some doubted that community leaders are working for the benefit of all, which they believe weakens the community. Others worried that the leadership is too divided and based on existing relationships.

Recommendations for addressing these issues included:

- **Focus on Diversity:** act on diversity, confront institutional racism, embrace diversity, be aware of the changed demographics, work toward racial diversity in order promote the growth of Grand Rapids.
- **Focus on Engaging the Community:** be honest about all the things that happen, involve the community more, accept input, respect the views and needs of others, engage in conversations and collaborative efforts, provide vision for our communities, embrace the changes that are coming.

- **Focus on Collaboration:** maintain the atmosphere of giving and collaboration, do more regionally, hold an ‘us’ mentality (not ‘we-they’), bring varied minds together to hear all ideas.
- **Focus on Connecting:** live in the community you serve, have an authentic understanding of the community.
- **Focus on Opportunity:** make available more leadership opportunities, prioritize what we invest in, invest in people, support the vital and effective group of leaders working “just below the surface” in the community, raise awareness of problems.

### **Leadership and Initiative**

When asked if leadership and initiative is expected of everyone in Grand Rapids, an overwhelming majority of participants believe it is not. Three themes emerged in the responses from participants:

1. Concern over real and perceived barriers to leadership positions and programs.
2. Current leaders not making room for new leaders.
3. Lack of interest or ability in leadership.

The real or perceived barriers include lack of communication, not being asked to participate, not involving problem areas or economically disadvantaged communities, lack of familial expectations, employment that doesn’t call for decision-making, and poverty and its struggles. Participants felt that “exclusion is one primary characteristic of this region;” “you need to be a part of certain groups;” and leadership and initiative is expected of “only certain population segments.” One participant stated that “the perception of not being in the leadership group is a strong deterrent.” Many people stated that the perception of a barrier to participation is just as effective as an actual barrier. Another participant talked about students in leadership as a means to express what she sees happening; this person felt that “initiative and leadership is expected of middle class and Caucasian populations” where “they are taught in their schools what is expected of them. Lower and middle class minority students are not ‘expected’ to excel.” Another participant echoed that belief, saying “it’s bigger than Grand Rapids, but people as a whole are ‘kept in their place’ and not encouraged, at a young age, to achieve more. We just don’t expect our children to be leaders, unlike other countries.”

Others felt that current leaders are reluctant to include new leaders or to relinquish control. One participant believed that leadership and initiative from dissenting or diverging groups is not given much chance to flourish. Another participant said that entrenched leaders don’t invite others in. The participants believed that, to greater or lesser degrees, most local leaders don’t want to share power or equalize opportunities. As one participant said, “people don’t want to ignite energy that they cannot control.” Others made similar observations, saying “it’s a control issue – leaders right now don’t want to lose or share control;” “knowledge is power and people in power fear unity;” and “too many chiefs mean too many diversions.” Participants stated that leadership and initiative is expected at top and middle levels, or of a few, but not of the average citizen. There is concern that those in leadership tend to be the same people – and “it seems they just rotate.”

Many participants expressed concern that a lot of community members are no longer interested in taking leadership positions, citing apathy and increased self-interest. As one person stated,

“we have created too much of a sense of entitlement and allowed others the right to walk away and not assist.” Others agreed, saying “everyone can work for the common good in even small ways. Unfortunately, our culture has become one of instant gratification; this often works against serving and helping the community,” and “personal responsibility and initiative are not well-understood among youth. There is an increasing sense of entitlement.” One participant said “there would be tremendous opportunity for positive change if leadership and initiative were expected of everyone.” However, this individual also said that “many people don’t like to leave their comfort zones” in order to participate or create change. Another person agreed, saying “people want to ‘sit at the table’ but are not willing to develop their character,” while another asked, “how can we be satisfied with ten percent turnout on voting day? We all need to be more civic-minded.” Still others say that more effective education about leadership and what it entails should be available to people in nontraditional leader communities.

Some participants believed leadership and initiative is not expected of everyone in Grand Rapids because not everyone is meant to lead. Others pointed out that there are people that like to follow and are at their best in supporting roles. As one participant said, “all leaders, no followers? That could be chaotic.” Some focus groups discussed the importance of people becoming involved as followers, both as a stepping stone to assuming leadership and as a means for making the changes they desire to see in their communities. One participant stated that “it’s about working together – a leader with no followers is not effective. You do gain from being a leader but it is about the gain of the followers.” Another participant noted that there are no training opportunities that teach people how to effectively support leaders; he thinks “it’s probably harder to be a good follower than a good leader.” Most of the Grand Rapids area programs focus on developing or creating leaders with little time devoted to what one participant called ‘followership.’

However, the collaborating organizational leaders and many focus group participants also ponder what lies beneath these responses: If we do not believe that everyone can provide varying levels of leadership or take initiative in life, what message does this send to the community? To young people? To new residents? To new leaders or emerging leaders?

### **Making Choices About the Community**

When asked if the people of Grand Rapids make choices about the community together, the majority of participants said no. Many people stated that only a few people make decisions. They identified polarization, fragmentation and disenfranchisement in the community-decision making process. According to the participants, the polarization is reflected both in who is involved in leadership and in how segments of the community make decisions in relation to other community segments – within neighborhoods, the city and the region.

Participants clearly expressed their concerns about divisions among leaders and leadership positions. They said that the community is “polarized – black/white,” there is a “lack of unity,” there are “pockets of special interest and no real community on a city level,” there is a “real disconnect between our business leaders and our elected officials,” we “have many silos and barriers to break down,” and “choices are made by a few.” They identified divisions in the community centering on race and ethnicity as well as economic status. One participant shared that “many people I know feel disenfranchised – not part of what they see as a ‘good ole boy’

system” while another stated that “the majority of people, especially those of color, simply hear what the plans are but are rarely invited to participate.” A third believed that “information is not solicited from minorities in an effective manner.” They expressed concern that “the greater community is fragmented into a number of fairly closed economic, social and ethnic groups that do not communicate well with one another. Those at the lower end of the economic scale seem to have little or no input. Neither do blue-collar folks.” As one participant stated, “this is a very segregated community, which is typically at odds regarding choices about community, mostly due to lack of sensitivity for all people as well as a lack of education and/or knowledge regarding all types of people.” Participants also said that “there is the typical disparity of the ‘haves’ in the suburbs and the ‘have nots’ in the city” and that “so many of the people who need to be ‘at the table’ are busy raising kids and making ends meet.”

If we aren’t making choices together as a community, what does happen? As one participant said, “I’m not sure the choices are truly ‘by the people’ or that input is solicited that much.” Another felt that “we don’t demand leadership and initiative – and I think there is also the opinion that most decisions are already predetermined.” Others agreed, saying there are “lots of community forums and summits on vital issues but real decision-making is still made by insiders,” “you always hear the same voices,” and “people in the community don’t get to the table.” In considering opportunities for the community to get involved and make choices together, participants expressed concern that all people may not know about them, choose to take advantage of them, nor “feel they will be heard if they try to participate.” There is concern that those who do make the final decisions are people with money and power. Participants noted that “most of the choices made for Grand Rapids are made by people that don’t reside in or know Grand Rapids outside of their employment” and that “there is a lot of dialogue and discussion; but those city ‘fathers’ with the money make the decisions.”

Participants explained “fragmentation” as people considering only the impact of their choices on their peers, but not on the region or even, sometimes, on their own neighborhoods. Participants felt that decisions are often made “from a perspective of each ‘segmented community,’ not West Michigan as a whole,” and that “separate communities follow their own agendas” with “people still working as islands.”

On the other hand, there are those who have had positive experiences and feel that the decision-making processes in the city are more open. One participant said that “the opportunity is there to voice in” while another believed that “there are models in place.” Another participant was involved in a successful effort to pass a millage for transit, and believes that process “was a community decision.” He believes that “it depends on the decision [being made] and how much everybody was included.” Some are torn about the ability of the community to make choices together, saying it is “not perfect, but [there is] good intention, mutual respect and positive vision” and that “to a certain degree, voices can be heard.” One participant stated that “it appears that there is an attempt to make choices together but its not always viewed or perceived that way by minority communities.”

Recommendations from the participants included “engaging the people of Grand Rapids [so that] they are more likely to feel ownership, get involved and vote,” asking influential leaders to work harder to get the community to the decision-making places, having broader community

engagement and a concentrated effort made to motivate people to take part in decision making, and more collaborations such as the Master Plan, Delta Strategy and the sustainability partnership between the city and educational institutions.

### **Relationships Between Leaders and the People of Grand Rapids**

Questioned about the kind of relationships local leaders have with the people of Grand Rapids, responses were, as one participant said, “as varied as the leaders.” Two themes emerged in the responses: first, relationships between leaders and constituents are very important; second, that most feel this area needs work. A slight majority of the participants felt that the relationships between local leaders and the community are strained or worse. For some, the relationships are those of convenience, and are seen as political, superficial, and/or patriarchal. Others said that there is no connection between leaders and the people, describing relationships that are distant, impersonal, fairly removed, inaccessible, disconnected, and hands-off. Some had little hope. One said, “for the most part, the relationship is tattered – torn and in dire need of mending;” another stated that it’s “very distorted in appearance, fragmented in reality. The leaders don’t have relationships with those who do not have power.” Others believed that relationships depend on who you are; that “leaders are typically inaccessible to those outside their network” and “not well-connected to all groups.”

Participants recognized the complexity of these relationships, acknowledging that citizens often play as much of a role as the leaders. One participant saw a general disconnect between many leaders and the people at large, and added, “Some people feel that it’s not their job to worry about leading. I think others feel shut out by leaders and as a result don’t want to participate in change.” On the other hand, there were those who saw relationships with local leaders as generally good or excellent. They called current leaders caring, selfless, committed, respectful, genuine, accessible, visible and open or fairly open. One participant said that the “relationship is strong for those who are interested” and another stated that “the relationships are fairly close for a city of this size.”

Recommendations were similar to those made in response to the discussions on leaders strengthening the community. They included:

- **Focus on Diversity:** do not be influenced by biases, collaborate with those of different beliefs, become more inclusive.
- **Focus on Engaging the Community:** provide visions/goals for the area as a whole, connect with small groups regularly and at varied times, listen and try others’ ideas, get more buy-in, consider the input people provide in community decisions, engage in meaningful dialogue.
- **Focus on Opportunity:** vary who leads, groom more leaders, become more than benevolent ‘do-gooders.’

### **Why Are the People of Grand Rapids Willing to Lead?**

As with the previous question, this question elicited a range of positive and negative responses. Asked the reasons that people lead in Grand Rapids, responses ranged from personal gain, money, power, political benefit and influence to seeing needs that should be met, implementing new ideas and wanting to make a difference for current residents and future generations. Many participants noted that people lead in order to gain something for themselves or to further their own agenda. As one participant stated, “the answer should be – to make positive changes.

However I believe many leaders lack integrity – and are holding positions for visibility, influence and power.” Others made similar observations, such as “those who are willing to lead or become leaders (which is some, not all of them) do it for their own agendas and not for the sake of the community.”

Participants were torn over what they believe makes people willing to lead in Grand Rapids, recognizing that there are those who are genuinely motivated to make the community a better place and those who lead in order to get ahead. One participant summed up their emotions succinctly: “First, to make change. Second, to get a free ride.” Another participant expressed doubt about some of the leaders, saying “many seem motivated by a genuine concern for the community; however, that concern often seems to be more related to the business affairs of the city or to the construction of major civic monuments.” Two others agreed, stating that most leaders are self-serving or in it for the notoriety, but “a select few truly want to make a positive difference” and “some really do want to foster positive change for a majority – but have to function from a weakened state.”

One participant noted that “many are not [willing to lead]. If you’re in an organization or network that empowers, you’re taught the value of the role. Without that empowering network or influence, few would bother – it’s too hard to break in when the circles are that tightly woven.” Another person thought “those who currently lead are there because of power, money and influence. However, I think there are those who are less influential and who lead within their small groups in Grand Rapids every day. These are people who see that something needs to change and choose to be persistent in their fights to get that changed. However, in many instances this change is difficult because they lack what the ‘big’ leaders in Grand Rapids have, which is money, power and influence.”

Those who lead in order to better the community do so to “carry forth positive change that is fair and equal for everyone” and “because they see a need for change in systems that are hurting people.” Participants noted that there are leaders who desire to “help facilitate the change that the community wants to see and because they want Grand Rapids to reach its highest potential,” “build a better community for the next generation,” and “help others and improve quality of life...to make this a better place to live.” One person believed “there is one compelling reason – recognition of the quality of life in this community – and the desire to pass that along to future generations.” Participants noted that some people feel called to lead, either “to represent their ethnicity or diversity – to be heard” or “have been blessed and, therefore, feel compelled to lead others to do good.” One participant believes that we in Grand Rapids are very fortunate, in that “the number of people who want to help others is astounding.”

The focus group participants’ experiences with leadership in Grand Rapids vary widely and appear to depend on certain variables such as one’s economic status, level of education and professional experience. Many participants believe that race, age, gender and physical ability also play a role. Participants say it also matters where you are from, who you know and what kind of support you’ve had. Some people have had positive experiences, built strong relationships with leaders and were themselves developed into leaders with training and support while others have struggled to gain access to leaders, participate in decision-making and access training or resources to develop leadership capabilities. The experiences are so different; it is almost as though they live in two different cities.

## **STATE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN GRAND RAPIDS**

### **Are there enough opportunities for leadership development?**

A slight majority of participants believe that there are enough opportunities for leadership development although many went on to share concerns about access to the programs. The two most common barriers cited to accessing leadership development were high enrollment costs and lack of time to participate. Many participants cited a lack of knowledge of the programs available, aside from the program they attended. Few have participated in more than one program although most participants are eligible for multiple programs or classes. Several participants expressed concern about how programs are targeted when they recruit new attendees, as most programs attract middle and upper economic class participants. One man stated, "If I worked at a fast food restaurant, I wouldn't know anything about leadership development opportunities in the community, nor would I participate." Others feel that the programs aren't truly and equally open to all segments of society, and know of peers who don't feel welcome to participate. One woman feels that too many programs just respond to "diversity initiatives" instead of providing "real and true opportunities" to people of color. Many people with physical limitations or disabilities also feel that they aren't welcome to participate or apply.

As graduates of both skill development and issue awareness-raising programs, the participants had many suggestions when asked what they would like to see in Grand Rapids as far as leadership development. While just over half of the participants felt like there is enough opportunity for development, they also had numerous suggestions as to how to improve existing programming. Most participants mentioned the need for increased, intentional communication around what is available in leadership development, as one participant said, "opening up the competition to participate." Specific suggestions included a community-wide newsletter with program requirement and deadline information as well as postings in public gathering places. This was followed by requests in making more programs accessible to more people, either financially, physically or through changes in requirements for participation, with special attention paid to socio-economics and racial/ethnic diversity. Several participants recommended that the programs either include representation from or directly target young people in grade school, high school and college. One participant suggested leadership development for Latinos offered in Spanish as a model that could be replicated for other non-English speakers while another wondered if the community could offer more to blue-collar workers.

Other opportunities recommended by participants involved expanding existing programming, especially follow-up after programs conclude. Ideas included offering continuing education for alumni in the form of classes or seminars and more information specific to different types of leadership (corporate, professional, grassroots, personal). Participants also see a need for increased networking opportunities, connections within the community, and current leaders mentoring future leaders on a consistent and broad level across the community. One participant recommends that representatives of the programs be involved "in the community to understand what the real needs of the community are." Another recommends providing "leadership opportunities among all sectors and considering personal leadership training opportunities to draw out qualities in people that will best position them for leadership" in the future. The program graduates see value in actively connecting the multiple local programs in a "collaborated effort to provide leadership opportunities among all sectors." Or as another participant said, "let's connect them!" – supplementing their development as leaders.

## **What are the strengths and weaknesses of leadership development in Grand Rapids?**

### **STRENGTHS**

The participants identified the people of Grand Rapids as one of its greatest assets in leadership development, as well as the programs already in place. Participants also believe that Grand Rapids is unique in its atmosphere and potential opportunities; it is clear that most people believe that Grand Rapids is a fortunate community compared to many in the country. There are many factors and characteristics that the area has in its favor: the city is young and fast growing, with many resources available (monetary, educational and otherwise), many cultures represented and excellent non-profit and for-profit programs. One person believes that Grand Rapids has “systems oriented thinking, entrepreneurial spirit, work ethic and good ‘values’ base” while another believes that Grand Rapids has a “conducive, positive, caring environment which is encouraging.” Other factors identified included the “sense of community ownership, faith-based culture” and “the networking, both personal and professional.”

Some participants stated that local leaders are a strength because in their experience, they are mostly accessible, provide a “solid foundation” and are “willing to share their expertise in a variety of ways.” As one participant put it, “Grand Rapids has a number of individuals with tremendous resources that are willing to invest and lead in important causes.” Another says that the people here are the greatest strength of leadership development, likening it to “ripples in a pond” because the “people organizing programs and the people participating in programs” are all “taking their skills a step further for the greater good.” A few participants believe there is access to great mentors who are willing to help in developing other leaders – “there are many individuals who want to help develop leaders and if they find you or you find them, it’s a great thing.” In contrast, other participants caution that citizens must be connected somehow in order to access networks. “There are many strong leaders in town and some of them are very accessible, if you have the right connections.” However, that hasn’t been the case for some, who stated that a lack of a mentor drove them to take more risks and grow as a leader on their own. One individual hopes that the many leaders in Grand Rapids allow “others within their various organizations to learn from them and assume roles” as leaders too.

Many participants cited their affiliated leadership development programs as a strength of leadership development in Grand Rapids, and appreciate “the focus on community leadership.” Several participants identified community organizations such as neighborhood associations, Institutes for Healing Racism, colleges/universities and area non-profit and volunteer networks as assisting in the development of leaders. Others feel there is a great commitment from area businesses, especially family owned, with “small business and corporations as a training ground and source of leaders.” One participant is glad that there are “many organizations located in the area that provide the opportunity for people to develop leadership skills” while another appreciates that “some are focused on particular groups of people (e.g., women, people of color) to try to increase diversity in leadership.”

As for atmosphere, there is a sense that Grand Rapids is a creative community. One participant feels that Grand Rapids has an “intent to change with good ideas” and that “now it’s a matter of putting all the ideas together.” Another participant feels that there is “openness, wanting to hear what the community had to say.” Several participants talked about the trust that the leadership development programs have built as well as creating “a heart to make a difference.” Others are

encouraged that leadership is “being talked about” and that “so many organizations are tackling it.” The opportunities to become involved are varied and available, including “nonprofit, industrial, cultural and political areas to join and network at a grassroots level – that can lead to leadership roles;” however there is concern that “the problem might be in communicating the opportunities to the broader community and removing any barriers potential participants might perceive there to be.” According to many participants, it’s very important to build on those intentions and creativity, “be encouraging” and “never stop trying to develop good leaders.”

## **WEAKNESSES**

When asked to share the weaknesses of leadership development in Grand Rapids, participants identified several areas they found lacking, in addition to time and financial resources as previously discussed. The focus group participants believe that the leadership development programs need to increase inclusion of the entire community in its programs, increase minority representation and diversity of the class groups and networks, and become more inviting, welcoming and open.

A majority of the participants expressed serious concerns about the lack of inclusion in leadership development and their associated networks, in a broad range of areas: age, gender, ethnicity, political views, physical and mental abilities and religion. Many expressed frustration and anger with closed networks, cronyism, silos and cliques. Additionally, the participants discussed the difficulty of being new to the community and trying to “break through the barrier of a closed community” as an outsider. One participant saw “remnants of the good ole boy system” while another felt that “the gatekeepers only allow a few new people to get involved in the community.” One woman is frustrated that leadership development doesn’t seem to be emphasized in the schools, so that students in Kindergarten – 12<sup>th</sup> grade classes are exposed to leadership development early on. She felt that this closes the mind set of the community to ‘out of the box’ thinking. Others would like to see a variety of leadership models explored and offered, so that people can continue to develop themselves as leaders from different perspectives and in a variety of ways.

The lack of inclusion goes further than the programs, some participants said, because “there are predispositions and bias when it comes to certain groups or people” and “it pervades the whole culture.” One woman shared that “as a whole, they [leaders] don’t try to understand people with disabilities ... I don’t think that is right.” Another person shared how disheartening it has been for her as she is told that she can’t do things, based on a disability, without receiving the opportunity to try; she said “people aren’t really willing to take a risk in that way.” Her comment was echoed by another participant who uses a wheelchair, who felt “if they had to be in these things [wheelchairs] like we do, they would think again.” Other leadership development participants don’t have to wonder if “they will be accepted as a full-fledged member of society.” The solution, says one participant, is to “treat the person as a person, not as having a disability.”

In addition, many participants noted a lack of racial and ethnic minority representation in leadership development. Most of the participants mentioned a need for increased diversity in the networks and program classes. Some believe this is slowly but surely occurring; others feel very strongly that not enough is being done. One participant expressed frustration, saying “they just don’t get it. Ignoring the richness of what other peoples and cultures can bring to the table.”

One person believes “there is not any diversity. It is all about money. If you have it, you are in and if you don’t, you are out.” Another believes that “Grand Rapids does not want to recognize the fact that ethnic minorities are here to stay and want the same things for themselves and their families that the ethnic majority wants and has.” The lack of minority representation in the programs is resulting in a “lack of minority faces in leadership positions;” Grand Rapids loses the “benefits of the development of a diverse leadership pool.” Participants see leadership development attracting and serving the ‘usual suspects’ – serving mostly white, male, heterosexual, wealthier, conservative and/or Christian community members. Bottom line, one participant says, “we need more diverse voices at the table” including people from all areas of the community to help us avoid the “politics of inclusion and exclusion.”

One participant summed it up as “in Grand Rapids, it’s who knows who. If you’re new or not ‘in’ yet, you don’t get asked – lots of talent goes untapped.” This person went on to say the importance of marketing the opportunities therefore becomes critical. The programs can appear “unapproachable and not inviting to ‘regular’ citizens.” As one participant stated, “we need to do a better job of inviting people in. For me, being asked was huge. Someone valued my ideas and opinions and wanted me to participate. We need to start asking the next generation of leaders.” This comment was echoed by another person, who is concerned that the “senior generation of business leaders will give way to a new generation.” If training opportunities aren’t communicated widely, this person wondered if “the new generation be skilled enough and aware enough to help the community deal effectively with the new generation of issues.”

Participants wondered if these programs really do provide “real access to leadership positions” or if they are able to “follow through with [their] mission statements.” One individual talked about leadership in terms of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ – “it is difficult to develop or obtain leadership without money, power or influence” although this person felt he could “personally develop his own leadership through work exposure and [his] training and continued persistence.” This comment was echoed by another participant, who discussed the need for people to take initiative in developing themselves as leaders even though many can’t afford to in terms of time and money. She pointed out that unfortunately, “just as often, some people are unwilling to make the financial investment in themselves” or able to do so.

A common theme heard throughout the focus groups is that “too many individuals leave Grand Rapids because they are not groomed for leadership positions – they couldn’t find those individuals who want to develop leaders.” Many people of color talked about friends, family and coworkers that came to the Grand Rapids area but didn’t stay because they didn’t feel connected. Some discussed wanting to leave themselves, due to “lack of opportunity.” This is a great concern for many. In one person’s experience, “leaders gravitate toward and mentor those just like them. You may get access to the network, but it’s difficult to rise to the top.” Another agreed, saying “I keep seeing the same people, when we need a revolving door – bring in one new leader with you.” One participant feels that “the current networks are unknown and seem exclusive on a variety of levels. The leadership networks are currently looking out for the interests of certain segments of the population while not connecting at all with other groups.”

## Conclusion

The Leadership Center of Franklin University has established ten Indicators of Leadership for central Ohio in its annual *State of Leadership* reports ([www.leadership.franklin.edu](http://www.leadership.franklin.edu)). These indicators touch on many of the issues and suggestions discussed by Grand Rapids area residents in this environmental scan on leadership, including the importance of cooperation across sectors, quality lifelong education and the balance between quality of life (community resources) and work (employment opportunities). Perhaps most importantly, the indicators also include

- a spirit of community among a diverse constituency
- the development, retention and recruitment of talented individuals who will provide future leadership, and
- a widely-shared long-term vision

The ideas behind these three indicators were the focus of much discussion and concern in the focus groups, with many people feeling that these are critical areas that Grand Rapids should focus on as the area continues to grow and change. Their recommendations were very similar as they raised concerns about Grand Rapids residents' ability to make connections with each other openly, embrace diversity in all forms, attract and retain current leaders, develop our own new and emerging leaders and share in a community vision that everyone can feel a part of.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation funded in part a study conducted by the Building Movement Project, anticipating the leadership shift that organizations will make “as Baby Boomers edge into their 50s and 60s.” The Foundation surveyed more than 2,200 nonprofit organizations and found that 65 percent were expecting to go through a leadership transition within the next 5 years. More than half of the organizations' leaders were 50 or older. The findings of the study, “*Up Next: Generation Change and the Leadership of Nonprofit Organizations*,” include recommendations for closing the leadership gap. The first and second recommendations again align with suggestions made by Grand Rapids' traditional and nontraditional leaders – investing in younger leaders and identifying and nurturing more leaders of color. The report echoes concerns raised about people leaving Grand Rapids for lack of connection and their questioning about whether or not the community is preparing for transitions in future leadership. The report encourages taking quick action, suggesting that current leaders help prepare the community and emerging leaders for the future. It states that “older leaders need to play an active role in encouraging next-generation leaders and valuing new ideas. Younger executive directors should do the same with the generation behind them.” In addition, the report echoes the sentiment heard from many nontraditional leaders in Grand Rapids – that the leadership does not reflect the diversity of the communities they serve – and recommends that new strategies be developed “to support a more multi-racial group of leaders that better reflect the communities nonprofits serve and that bring the full range of knowledge and ideas necessary to invent and implement effective responses to community and other problems.” It also highlights the concern shared by focus group participants that there are few local leaders opening up leadership opportunity for others or intentionally developing leaders for the future.

Both reports recommend telling “our” story and hosting continued dialogue or structured conversations. According to Franklin University's Leadership Center, one indicator of leadership is “our story” or the “ability to tell our community's positive story outside of our community, communicating that central Ohio is a good place to live and work...” Grand Rapids area foundations, nonprofits and organizations such as the Delta Strategy annually report out to

the community on a variety of achievements and outcomes on topics such as public safety, healthcare, employment and transportation. Perhaps it is time to consider adding leadership and leadership development to the annual radar. Many focus group participants were appreciative of the opportunity to reflect on their development as new or current leaders, saying that it was helpful to talk about their experiences, learn from each other and think more strategically about possible areas for further development. Many commented that this is a new and important conversation for them, one that few are able to have on a regular basis.

The “*Up Next*” report states that “structured conversations can discuss past and current assumptions about issues and their causes, how these have been addressed, and what is needed to move solutions forward in the coming decades.” These on-going conversations might provide a venue to surface new issues and discover ways to meet needs across the community for leadership development. As one participant said, “we must have varied minds that come together with all ideas heard and true collaboration.” Another hoped that this kind of communication will help address the “disconnect between leaders and their own vision versus an authentic understanding of the community they represent.”

One critical question to consider, raised in the Harwood Institute’s report on community leadership programs, is “leadership for what?” According to the report, “*Understanding Community Leadership Programs: A Harwood Institute Report to the Kettering Foundation*,” most traditional leadership development programs train participants to act on behalf of the community in a trustee type role, focusing “on the power structure acting within the community and attempts to engage those within that power structure in positive efforts to improve the community.” Efforts are made to get to know the community and have diverse representation and participation but “leaders are already ‘established’ and their further advancement up the leadership ladder is one of the key measures of program success.” The Harwood Institute suggests democratic practice, meaning “encouraging people from ‘deep within’ communities and across communities to come together to find solutions to problems and then moving these solutions through the existing system” as a more effective model to engage citizens and open leadership development opportunities more consistently across the community. This recommendation builds on the participants’ suggestions to further engage the community by soliciting input throughout the community, connecting with smaller groups of people more often, listening, trying others ideas and again sharing a vision for Grand Rapids.

We’ve learned that there are people who feel that they are not included in community decision-making, that we need to reach further into the community, that there are barriers, real and perceived, that exist to participation in both leadership development and leadership positions. We’ve learned that new and emerging leaders are looking for more support. We have suggestions for what we can do better with what we already have. At the conclusion of its report, the Franklin University Leadership Center asks two critical questions for us to consider:

- 1) “Now that you know the perception in our community, what changes will you make?”
- 2) “What can you do to raise the level of leadership around you, your organization and our community?”

*The collaborative partners are continuing to work on these issues. For more information or to get involved, please email: [grcommunityvoice@hotmail.com](mailto:grcommunityvoice@hotmail.com).*

## **Best Practices – Developing and Supporting Emerging Leaders**

Focus group participants had many suggestions for how current and traditional leaders can help develop and support emerging leaders. Grand Rapids area emerging and nontraditional leaders recommend:

- 1) **Be intentional about developing diversity in leadership.** “Seeing diversity of age, race and gender in leadership was helpful for me.” “Listening and trying others ideas and varying who leads what would groom more leaders and get more buy-in.” “We can’t just have one kind of leader or leadership to get it all done. A good leader will build that diversity.”
- 2) **Communicate opportunities.** “We cannot have fair representation if we cannot have at least the opportunities to participate in leadership presented to all.” “Help create a larger voice.”
- 3) **Listen.** “Actively solicit or work to hear what people want/need.” “Really connecting through small groups regularly and at varied times would help.”
- 4) **Make the invitation/Ask.** “I think it is often a matter of asking – we don’t ask enough.”
- 5) **Empower through choice.** “Let people know their input counts. Don’t teach down to people, try to equalize the relationship. Take a community discussion approach to empower people regardless of their status.” “Influential leaders should work harder to get the community to the decision making places.”
- 6) **Share what you have learned** to build relationships and confidence. “It is important to build that relationship and confidence. It can’t be found in a book. You need to look at your success and failures.” “Seeking first to understand and building relationships is a first step.”
- 7) **Be a role model.** “I have had role models that have brought out my leadership characteristics. They gave me the opportunity to lead and volunteer plus build my confidence. They let it naturally evolve.”
- 8) **Think strategically together.** Have someone help you think about leadership strategically versus just doing it as a volunteer. “I needed support and encouragement to make the leap to leadership. Even when I failed, my supporters helped me see the good in what was done.”
- 9) **Get involved.** “Support those that are doing what needs to be done.” “Make a concentrated effort to motivate people to take part in decision making.” “Build a supportive network, mutual respect, and make emerging leaders feel safe so that their leadership emerges.”
- 10) **Try new methods and opportunities.** “Take people out of their setting to help others – effective tool to help develop young leaders, especially in the inner city.”

## **Best Practices – Developing and Supporting Emerging Leaders**

- 11) **Invest in people.** “Business leaders are investing in downtown. Political leaders are investing in infrastructure. There is not enough investment in people.”
- 12) **Change your approach.** “Look hard for a leader instead of going someplace that is familiar. Leave your comfort zone.”
- 13) **Experience leads to opportunity.** “I was able to identify a need and a solution. It was so scary at first but I was driven and passionate enough to make it work, even if it only helped one person.”
- 14) **Early start is critical.** “That really planted the seeds for what I did in college and after. The start I had as a young person was really important. It didn’t feel like leading but it was. It helped me to be more of a pioneer. I had the confidence from my background.”
- 15) **Give autonomy for creativity and development** in a team environment. “They let me make mistakes and take risks while supporting me and encouraging me. That helped me make decisions effectively and efficiently. That is a real quality of a leader, to be able to make decisions, to take a risk and to take a stand.”

## Advice to Emerging Leaders from Emerging Leaders:

- **Find what motivates you.** “Everybody has a purpose. You’ll find it at whatever level you find yourself.”
- **Maintain your motivation.** “Feed your personal motivator if that is what you need while keeping the heart of the issue at hand.”
- **Be creative.** “See yourself in different lenses and apply that to your life. You could be a great leader for the Girl Scouts but the newest person at work.”
- **Keep the balance** between apathy and becoming consumed. Set boundaries and pick your passions. “If you are spread too thin, you are not effective. A leader can keep that balance.” “Sometimes it is easier to get things done if I’m not perceived as a leader. When I do acknowledge the leadership, it’s overwhelming and overbearing.”
- **Invest in yourself.** “I need to invest the time, energy and passion in myself as well as others.”
- **Give your best effort.** “It reflects on me if I didn’t give my best.”
- **Believe in what you do.** “You need to buy in to what you are doing.”
- **Bring others to the table and empower them** to get involved. “Don’t allow others the right to walk away and not assist. This is their community as much as it is yours.”
- **Help others understand.** “Getting buy in isn’t tangible. It doesn’t show like tearing down burned-down houses.”
- **Think of leadership as a positive word.** “It can be intimidating. I think we think of leadership as always being formal. So we push a few people to be visible leaders and be a voice for a larger group.”
- **Separate yourself from the cause.** “What happens to the cause when you leave? How do you pass the torch?”
- **Share the work.** “You can’t be everything at all levels. One of our tasks is to prevent ‘the fade’ of people who rise to leadership.” “Rally others in your community to also lead and make/create change.”
- **Follow your instincts.** “Good leaders don’t always know they are leading – it’s just what they do.”

## **Advice to Emerging Leaders from Emerging Leaders:**

- **Recognize your limits.** “Leadership comes with the pressure to be perfect even when I’m not.”
- **“Don’t ask anyone to do what you would not do.”**
- **Take time to think.** “Be careful not to have reactionary responses and not get at what is behind the problem or issue.”
- **Probe deeper.** “I found one group’s intention was to be inclusive but because of their lack of knowledge, it was perceived as them being the opposite.”
- **Live what you learn.** “Combination of classroom and community work. We were living what we were learning. I can apply what I’m learning at the same time.”