

Note: Our Vital Connections On Air episodes are audio-based interviews. Written transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before referencing content in print.

Christy Kallevig: Welcome to Vital connections on Air, a podcast brought to you by University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality that explores the trends and topics important to communities and leaders throughout Minnesota. My name is Christy Kallevig, and today I am joined by Ben Winchester, who is a senior research fellow with the Center for Community vitality as we discuss the leadership gap in Minnesota.

Christy Kallevig: Hello Ben.

Ben Winchester: Hi Christy.

Christy Kallevig: Thanks so much for joining us today. As a research fellow, you do a variety of work within the center and in communities across not only Minnesota, but really throughout the U.S. What motivates you to do this research and work to better understand our communities?

Ben Winchester: Well, number one, I love small towns and rural places and I think they are really great places to help understand how the world is changing. I think a lot of the changes that we see around the world take place first in our small towns. So I continue to do applied research [is what we call it] on topics relevant those small towns and rural areas.

Christy Kallevig: While it's very interesting work, and I know that we have all definitely benefited from the work that you did around the Brain Gain, which we've talked about previously on this podcast. I'm really excited to dig into this concept of a leadership gap today. So what have you found in communities that led you to discover this gap in leadership that we're seeing?

Ben Winchester: Yeah I think there are two things. Number one, I had a really basic question about how many people do we need to run our town? It's when you think about how leadership and I'm talking about positional leadership. Here are people that are appointed or elected to different governmental positions, whether it's at the city council level or the county commissioner level, or even things like soil and water conservation districts and sewer districts. We've got all these different of governmental agencies that require leaders, but at the same time, we've got especially in Minnesota here, a really thriving civic life in terms of participation in nonprofits. So when you add those two together-that's by official statistical term is bean counting. When you count the beans, the number of groups that you [have] that demand leaders and compare that to the number of people that you [have] that can supply leadership.

So it's really a basic demand and supply model, where organizations demand people and people supply leadership; and it's kind of an economist way of looking at it, but really I wanted to better understand. You know we hear a lot of anecdotes about people wearing multiple hats and we're overextended, but it's really are very rarely backed up by data. So the second thing I found was a

great data set from the National Center for Charitable Statistics and they provide us data on the number of nonprofits, the type of nonprofits you've got — this is all at the county level. As well as things like assets and revenue of those nonprofits and other traits related to the nonprofit sector. So that allowed me then to really start digging into understanding you know how many leaders does it take and how many leaders we have in our small towns.

Christy Kallevig: And so how many leaders does it take and are we really running short of leaders?

Ben Winchester: Yeah. So it was interesting. Initially when I just started gathering the nonprofit data because nonprofits change a little bit more frequently than government units. You don't just up and create new cities and townships every day. Even the counties that we have, again, were born during that during a time of horse and buggy, and we haven't changed those all that much.

So when I look at nonprofits, there is kind of this idea out there, too that social life was dying and withering and that people were less involved than they were before, and we've got this narrative of non-involvement. I would say [this idea was] related to books like *Bowling Alone*. Social capital is in decline and people aren't showing up at city council meetings. But at the same time, for the first run-through the data, showed me that from 2000 to 2010, we had a 10 percent gain in the number of people in the country. There was a 32 percent gain in the number of nonprofits. Even in the most rural counties where we lose people (like one to five percent of people), the number nonprofits still went up by 15 percent. And you know that obviously is not the story of death and doom of nonprofits across the country. It just kind of startled me that we had such great numbers. Then when I, of course, look at Minnesota, we had an 8 percent gain in population over those 10 years and a 19 percent gain in the number of nonprofits. Even in the most rural counties where we lose five percent of people, the number nonprofits went up by 14 percent. So that really led me down the road of "wait a minute, maybe it's not dying."

Maybe things are changing. Just like with rural communities as they've gone through their history, we just don't have all the dead laying all around. We actually have towns that have persisted and remained vital despite all these changes. So then we start looking a little bit deeper into the data, and we know generally when you look at the type of state we are here in Minnesota — we passed things like the Legacy Amendment. And obviously people are very engaged in the arts community in recreational communities. We started to see a trend in how people change their leadership and how they change where they want to be involved. And so, we've seen this before. If you go back to 1880 you know the number of nonprofits and social civic organizations you'd have would be geared around things like Ferrier groups or homemaker groups or temperance groups, the anti-sin and vice folks. So we don't have them anymore and why is that? It is because generally social groups reflect society's interests at any given time. We don't have those groups because of a lot of different reasons, but we've got new groups here today. I think what I've seen is that there's there's just a general lack of understanding of how our non-profit structures have changed over the years and where people have shifted their time. So while they may not be in the city council, they're in the recreational groups or the health and wellness type groups. So really it's just a shift in where people want to spend their time and less about an overall decline in social involvement.

Christy Kallevig: And so really we're looking at when you say not non-profit, you're not just talking about the local social service agency that's maybe helping homelessness, but you're talking about the hockey groups and the snowmobile groups and those types of organizations as well. Right?

Ben Winchester: Yeah that's right. We've got arts, culture and humanities-types groups environmental groups, animal related groups, and you know animal groups such as Eagles and Lions clubs animals. But at the same time, [there's] like animal welfare and shelter type groups that have actually had very large increases in Minnesota here. Yes, we do have human services, which also includes things like hospitals. Many of us have nonprofit hospitals and art museums, and includes those as well as churches which makes up you know one of the biggest sectors we have. There is a diverse landscape in terms of where people have historically spent their time. And it's somewhat interesting to kind of look through that data and you do see declines in certain areas. The societal groups like the Eagles and the Lions have lost a number of groups over the years. But again like here in Minnesota, we've seen great gains in arts recreation, health and wellness type groups.

Christy Kallevig: Do you see the shift or gap in leaders just in greater or rural Minnesota or do you also see it in the urban and metropolitan areas as well?

Ben Winchester: Yeah both really. It's all across the landscape. So we do tend to see a higher growth in the number of nonprofits in the metro, but that's really an artifact of they just have more people. [So I tend not] to compare that. So what we actually found is a good way to compare that is to look a lot of social scientists like use like number of groups per 10000 people. But that really [averages out] like .5 groups for 10 people or whatever rate, which is hard to interpret. So actually if you invert that — I created an indicator called population for organizational role. And this looks at how many people in your community does each group have to tap into to look for a leader.

So for example, Nicollet County has a population organizational role of eight. One in eight people have to serve as a nonprofit leader; again, we include government in this — because they require leaders to their elected and appointed positions. So you know we found a variety of demands, or what we call leadership demands. And we find a lot of variety across the state in this, but what we generally found that urban areas have obviously many more people to tap into [for]nonprofit leader[s] than we have in our more rural parts of the state. So in urban Minnesota one in 151 people have to serve as a leader in their community, while in the most rural parts of the state it's down to one in 16. So you know, like one person per city block has to serve as a leader in our small towns and our rural places. Then you think about what are the impacts of like, you're going out you know have to create a new group to help serve some type of mission — like how do you start building a new group when you've already got so many in your community. Or if you're holding a community event, how do you get the word out to people? How do you partner with people? There's actually way more questions than answers in terms of, like "Wow, now I better understand this." I better understand why we feel so much pressure in our town when it's hard to find somebody to step up for leadership. Rather than blaming people, blame our own success. Blame the fact that we've got so many nonprofits. In Minnesota, we're like in the top 10 in the country in terms of nonprofits per person. But that also means that we've got more

groups that need leaders in our community. So there are a lot of implications here. It's obvious that you know every time a new nonprofit gets born in our rural environment that there are even fewer people to tap into as a nonprofit leader. You know you're competing for people, you're competing for time i.e. volunteers, and for money. So if you've got 100 groups and you're in your county and used to keep tacking on 10 to 20 percent, it's going to have an impact that's going to place even more demands for people to lead in your rural community.

Christy Kallevig: So what I'm hearing you say is that there is truth to some of the leadership fatigue that we hear when we're out in communities.

Ben Winchester: That's right. It's significant more so in our rural communities where these demands for leaders are so high. In fact, even when you look at growth in the nonprofit sector and you kind of account for the number of leaders that you need. We create roughly enough nonprofits that demand almost 1700 new leaders in Minnesota a year. And then when you look across the landscape, like how many training programs do we have, like we've got our programs here in Extension that do like community leadership training and individual training. We also have things like Blandin Foundation and Bush Foundation — they do leadership training too. And you know I used to think years ago that boy, we've got all these groups doing leadership training, isn't there a bunch of overlap? And now I think there's not even near enough that we are not producing enough leaders to even keep up with the number of non-profit growths that we see.

So it's kind of, you know, on one hand that's a really great thing to know that people feel comfortable enough to start new nonprofits that they associate in ways that reflect their interests. And they're finding a vitality in their own community. But at the same time, it does lead to these upward pressures in terms of number of leaders that we need in our small towns, and we look at a number of different solutions. You know on one side we just keep training new leaders. But the other is how much better can we have organizations work with each other? Right? If we've got organizations that are "siloes out" and that number is growing. This is ultimately going to lead even more fragmentation in our communities.

So you know are there ways to help bridge these organizations and to bridge communities in our counties. Which is why honestly I'm a big fan of our own bridging programs here in Extension. I see this as a solution to help solve this issue of fragmentation of our nonprofit sectors.

Christy Kallevig: They are great programs I will agree with you there. So when you look at kind of bridging those organizations I've heard you mention the unpopular idea that maybe some organizations have just reached their peak [or] have exceeded their lifespan. If there was a shift in organizations do you think that it would address some of these leadership issues?

Ben Winchester: Yeah you know I think all of us can name a nonprofit or two that has the same three or four people and they wonder where everybody's at, that nobody's coming to their meetings, but ultimately they've lost their gas. That's right. It's interesting when you look back on even the work of Alexis de Tocqueville who was a Frenchman in the early eighteenth hundreds who traveled around the eastern seaboard of the U.S. and he wondered like what is so unique about America. And one of the things he wrote about in his book Democracy in America was

that Americans have this very distinct way of organizing, that whenever there is a challenge or the community, that Americans have banded together, form an association, rise up and meet the challenge and then dissipate back down. And then when the next challenge comes about the band back together, form an association and dissipate back down. And that's an incredible model. But there's one distinct part of that that we never do and that's dissipate. Like when is the last time we voluntarily closed our nonprofit like, "Hey our work is done" right? We don't. It's almost comical but it's so serious and its implications here, in that we don't just voluntarily close our nonprofit. We feel like, "Oh we've been doing this for 20 years we should keep doing it." Well maybe you shouldn't. Maybe there are ways to help not only keep this leadership going, but to help reinvigorate other groups by partnering with other organizations, and maybe it means closing your doors. But when you close the doors, those leaders need to move somewhere else, which means the other groups need to be receptive and open who you know welcoming new leaders that may not talk the same language. They may not have the same ways of achieving a goal.

We tend to see this in many communities where, for instance, you moved to a small town and you get invited to sit on a board. Well then you wonder who's on the board and what are they doing? In a lot of times it's like well here's the five things we do every year. And you know which one do you want to sign up for? When I would argue that there is a great need to allow organizations the flexibility to welcome these new ideas. I would call it clearing the slate. Clear the slate of 20 percent of your activities every couple of years. Let the newcomers in that group define what that group means for them. Because ultimately you can have your mission and many ways to get there. And I would argue there are really strategic ways that organizations can use this strategy to not only welcome newcomers but to bring them into leadership roles in the future.

Christy Kallevig: So you've mentioned a little bit that maybe our approach needs to be a bit different. If our listeners are living in a community and they feel like they've put up flyers, they have done everything they can to bring people into their organization. Have they really done everything or what do you think are some of the best strategies to get newcomers or just new leaders involved in organizations.

Ben Winchester: Yeah I would say it always starts with a small request and that request cannot be, "Do you want to sit on the board?" It is more like they were having the pancake supper to help the firemen on Saturday morning. You want to help us out like you know it is. It is the very personal side of community life. You know one of the things that we talk about is there are strategies for helping to get people out. So for example if you're going to have a community meal how do you get the word out about that? Right. You put on the radio? Well, I listen to Pandora and I've not listened to our local radio station for like, forever, or opened the newspaper. Kind of the same thing, if I happen to not visit the website for a week, then I'm going to miss that. There's community calendars out there.

There's things like Facebook, and if you're on Facebook, you're over the age of 35. Well we do email, now well if you do that, you're over the age of 25. The problem is the number one method for successful invitations is text messaging, but honestly, text messaging starts with the relationship. You cannot cold call or cold text all newcomers in town. So I asked people, like what is the last time you invited a newcomer over for supper? When is the last time you spend

time with people? And I and I work from the premise that we have what I call this warm body syndrome, and I think we talk about it in the last podcast too that you know when we talk about getting people into our jobs it's they're a warm body. When I talk about like I need to board members, "Oh there's John he's new in town, let's get him on the board." Well he's a warm body like do you even know if John is interested in this group? I mean so there's a lot of personal work that needs to take place before leadership gets talked about. It starts with engagement and then can lead to leadership over time. So I think there are just differences in how the younger generations want to participate and how they want to communicate. And at the same time, it's very much, I would say a decentralized approach to leadership and it's a bit like the centralized power structure that we know about today. You know, there's not just one person in charge of our town. We've got these centralized power structures with a lot of different kind of pockets of power around town.

So in the same idea holds in terms of going to a meeting. Younger people generally do not want to sit through a meeting where they're listening to five or six other communities updating the board on what's going on. I don't want to sit through an hour listening to something I'm really not, I would say obviously interested in, so moving away from committee work and moving towards task forces, where then you're just reporting on things that got done, very short, very brief. So I think there are a lot of different strategies like that you need to play with that. But at the heart of this is really just engaging the newcomers, talking to them about what they're interested in. And again, engagement before leadership and start with a small request.

Christy Kallevig: What have you seen or heard in communities that you think is a great model? I know it's there. There is a community that is looking at doing some newcomer dinners. Is there anything else like that that you've seen and just said, "Wow, this is amazing the way that they're engaging their newcomers?"

Ben Winchester: Yeah, in Northeast Minnesota there's a group called ReGen, which is helping newcomers just socially organize and get together for different events. They've got educational events and they've got entertainment events. So I think there's a lot of strategies out there. But it's going to be, in many ways, born from those newcomers. So in many ways, helping them facilitate the social connections between newcomers is more effective than just saying, "Hey there's a newcomer, let's get them to my meeting." Rather it's more about, "Can I help newcomers connect with each other?" and honestly, once you get people in the same room, they'll organize themselves in many ways. Like you can prompt them with very basic community development practices out there. But you know, human beings are social animals. We are going to organize ourselves, so it's less about organizing life for people and more about providing opportunities for people to socially engage each other.

Christy Kallevig: Thank you again for spending some time, Ben, with us talking about the leadership gap today, and I look forward to hearing more about this important research in the future.

Ben Winchester: Thank you Christy.

Christy Kallevig: Thank you again to Ben Winchester for being our guest today. To learn more about the work that Ben and his colleagues at the Center for Community Vitality are doing, visit our website at extension.umn.edu/community. Here you will find more information on the leadership gap, the Brain Gain and other resources to help you address the leadership needs at your community. Visit the leadership and civic engagement alumni blog to read more about what Extension is doing to help communities prepare their future leaders.

Also make sure to follow us on Facebook and Twitter to stay connected with the latest news and resources from the Center for Community Vitality. Thank you again for joining us for this episode of Vital connections on Air.