



**J.W. Fanning Institute
for Leadership Development
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**



**MIDDLE GEORGIA REGIONAL LEADERSHIP CHAMPIONS
IMPACT REPORT
APRIL 2021**

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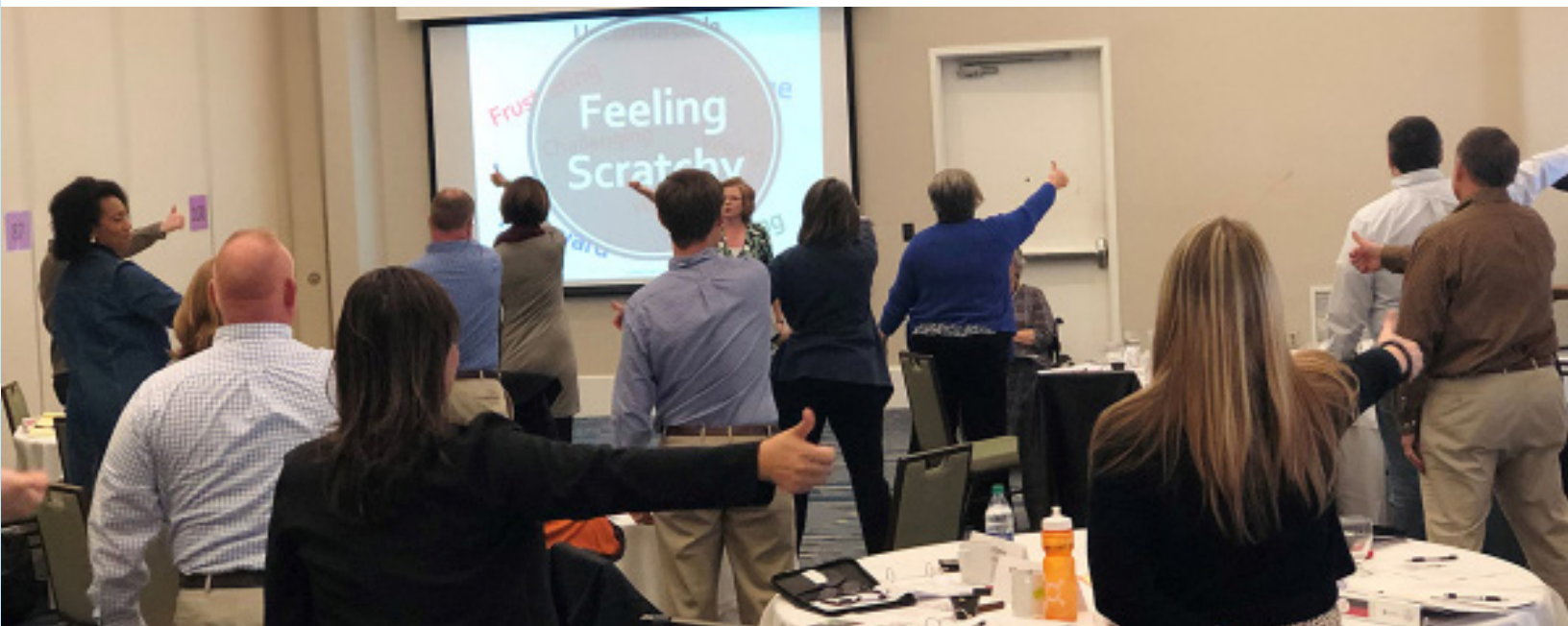
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SECTION 1

ABOUT THE PROGRAM



A regional assessment published by the Middle Georgia Regional Commission (MGRC) titled “2016-2036 Plan for... A Thriving Middle Georgia” found that “in order for the communities in Middle Georgia to achieve individual success, they must not only identify *their* assets and weaknesses, but also must understand the concerns of their neighbors. Once communities recognize their common, diverse, and complimentary characteristics, leaders can utilize partnerships to foster and harness regional solutions (Executive Summary, 2015, p. 2). In an effort to develop a committed, diverse leadership group that not only understands the region’s issues and challenges, but also works collaboratively to build regional success by identifying opportunities and articulating a future vision for Middle Georgia, MGRC initiated conversations about a regional leadership program with the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development at the University of Georgia. Following several months of discussion, the concept was presented to and endorsed by the Middle Georgia Regional Commission Council. The Fanning Institute did extensive research to frame elements that would be essential to the success of a regional leadership program. In mid-2014, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission received funding from the U.S. Department of Defense Office of Economic Adjustment to implement the Middle Georgia Regional Leadership Champions (MGRLC) Program.

The MGRLC program purpose as summarized by the MGRC is “to build a network of people throughout the region who appreciate the value that each community adds to the region and who develop the leadership skills to understand how they can play a role in building a stronger region by working together across geographic boundaries” (Fanning, 2018). The objectives include:

- Developing a committed, diverse leadership group that understands the region’s issues and challenges, values the opinions represented in the group, recognizes the strengths of its members, and works collaboratively to build regional success.
- Empowering the Leadership Champions to identify opportunities and articulate a future vision for Middle Georgia during the program.
- Creating implementation strategies and work groups, developed in cooperation with the Middle Georgia Regional Commission, to be implemented in the year following commissioning of the program participants.

The first cohort, facilitated by the Fanning Institute, launched in 2015. Forty (40) local leaders from throughout the region and representing multiple sectors participated. This cohort was unique as it focused on developing the Middle Georgia Regional Leadership Champions’ vision, core values and priorities for the region. The vision statement developed by the inaugural class was “fostering collaborative efforts to be catalysts for improving economic prosperity, education and quality of life for a thriving Middle Georgia.” This vision statement has been a guiding premise throughout all cohorts.

Cohorts 1-4 were funded by the U.S. Department of Defense Office of Economic Adjustment and consisted of seven uniquely designed sessions, delivered once a month by Fanning faculty. Each session was designed to align with both the long- and short-term objectives of the leadership program and included the following topics: collective impact; regional data and action principles; risk, agenda setting and collaborative decision-making; educational challenges; principals of dialogue and importance of stakeholders; importance of continuous communication; and challenges of evaluations.

Funding from the Department of Defense expired in 2019 and the Middle Georgia Regional Commission Council voted to support the continuation of the MGRLC program, in part with generous funding by Georgia Power, for the 2020 program year. The change in funding required Fanning and MGRC to think strategically about ways to remain true to the purpose and vision of the program while operating with a lower budget. The redesigned program included eleven (11) sessions; a two-day opening retreat followed by six (6) “Leadership Competency” sessions facilitated by Fanning faculty, three (3) “Issue Session” days facilitated by the MGRC in consultation with Fanning, a “Peer Coaching” reconnect day with no facilitation, and a Commissioning Ceremony. The fifth cohort began its program in January 2020. The cohort was able to meet in-person for the opening retreat and February session but was then required to postpone the March and April sessions due to Covid-19 and subsequently redesign the program to accommodate the pandemic situation. This report seeks to illustrate the life of the program to date and plans for studying the impact on the region going forward.

OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

The MGRLC program has commissioned over 130 leaders during the five cohorts: Cohort 1 had 40 participants, Cohort 2 had 24 participants, Cohort 3 had 21 participants, Cohort 4 had 24 participants, and Cohort 5 had 22 participants. All eleven (11) counties in the Middle Georgia region are represented by MGRLC alumni. Most participants came from Macon-Bibb (19.4%) and Houston (29.5%) counties with significant representation from Monroe (12.4%), Jones (7.8%), Baldwin and Peach (7.0%) counties. Participants came from diverse industries such as government (county/city administrators, commissioners, mayors, etc.), emergency management (police/fire/EMT/911), education (public and private), social services, banking and finance, real estate, and small business.

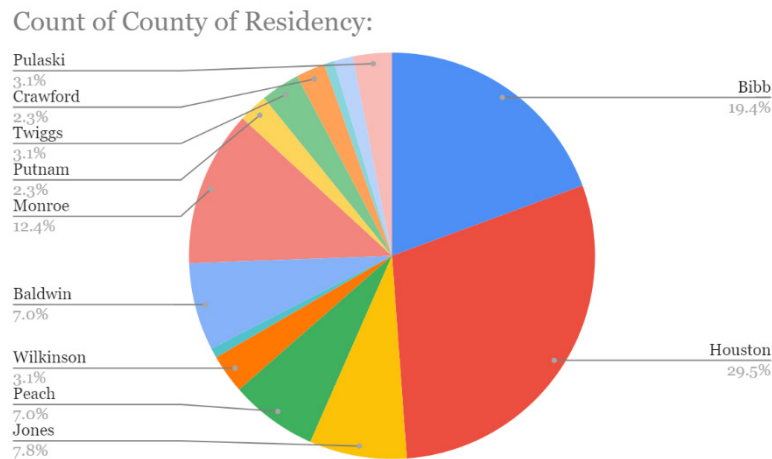


Figure 1: County Data

SECTION 2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Created in 2015 as a partnership between the Middle Georgia Regional Commission and the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development, the Middle Georgia Regional Leadership Champions (MGRLC) program has helped “build a network of people throughout the region who appreciate the value that each community adds to the region and who develop the leadership skills to understand how they can play a role in building a stronger region by working together across geographic boundaries.”



130

individuals have graduated from MGRLC

11

middle Georgia counties represented in the program



The program brings together leaders from the government, education, nonprofit and business sectors to develop their leadership skills and become more engaged in the middle Georgia region.



97%

of participants know more about their role as a leader in middle Georgia

100%

of participants say they are equipped to make the middle Georgia region better



MGRLC graduates said the program improved their collaboration, communication and networking skills.

A 2018 graduate said the program helped them in “*identifying the strengths of the counties in the region and making suggestions on where each county can partner to build up the region as a whole.*”

Meanwhile, a 2017 graduate said the program helped “*open lines of communication between regional leaders and the ability to address the uncomfortable topics.*”

Finally, a 2019 graduate said the program improved their skills in “*working with other communities to address issues regionally. Relationships are so important in addressing issues that are causing situations for citizens.*”

The most recent class of graduates in 2020 was also asked if they plan to become more involved in regional leadership efforts because of this program. 95 percent said they would become more involved.

The 2020 MGRLC class is already putting that commitment into action by beginning a financial literacy program for youth in middle Georgia in partnership with local banks to address quality of life and the poverty cycle.

In its first five years, the MGRLC program has empowered a diverse group of 130 leaders from an 11-county region with the skills for “fostering collaborative efforts to be catalysts for improving economic prosperity, education and quality of life for a thriving middle Georgia.”

After finishing the program in 2018, one graduate said, “*I see myself as someone who values inclusivity, partnerships, and tangible outcomes. My ability to engage people from the business community, government and impoverished communities allows me to be a bridge for dialogue and communication. I now see myself as a catalyst for improving economic prosperity, education, and quality of life in middle Georgia.*”

Moving forward, we will continue evaluating how the program is impacting individuals taking on leadership roles and collaborating throughout the region.

SECTION 3

METHODOLOGY

The outcomes driving this study were broken down into short-, intermediate-, and long-term. The desired short-term outcomes hoped to see were: 1) increased knowledge of leadership skills and 2) more engaged citizens. The intermediate outcomes were: 1) increased knowledge and retention of leadership skills, 2) increased participation in leadership positions within the community/region, and 3) increased collaboration between counties in middle Georgia. The long-term, societal outcomes are: 1) continued learning and retention of leadership skills that can be shared with the community/region, 2) larger pool of community leaders to hold leadership positions through the community/region, and 3) increased collaboration between counties in middle Georgia for the greater good of the region. Below, you will see the methods in determining if the outcomes were met.

Beginning in 2017, Fanning implemented a post-program assessment to measure the change in knowledge and perception of self and of region in the participants. In 2018 and 2019, Fanning implemented a pre- and post-program assessment. For the 2020 cohort, Fanning implemented a new pre- and post-program assessment to begin a longer-term study to measure impact. For the purposes of this report, post-program assessments, individual session surveys, and one focus group were analyzed to determine the extent of individual learning (short-term outcomes) and intentions to apply learning and exercise leadership after completing the program (intermediate outcomes).

Although the post-program assessment has changed and evolved over the years to mirror changes in curriculum, the premise was the same across all assessments. The post-program survey was administered via paper or the Qualtrics program at the end of the final session of the program. Ninety-one (91) leaders from the middle Georgia region attended MGRLC between the years 2017 and 2020. The post-program survey had an overall response rate of 82.42% (n=75), across cohorts two through five. The survey offered anonymity in order to encourage honest responses. The assessments used a mixed-methods design to collect quantitative and qualitative data and data was analyzed using SurveyPro, Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel. There were also focus groups performed with 2018 graduates, the transcribed data was analyzed via basic content analysis, and pertinent results are reported in the next section.

SECTION 4

RESULTS & FINDINGS

To determine if the short-term goal of increased knowledge was met, Fanning analyzed the post-program assessment data. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believe that their knowledge of their role as a leader in their region and their ability to affect change in the region has improved as a result of completing the MGRLC program. While 97% of the participants indicated that their knowledge either greatly improved, improved, or slightly improved, one participant experienced no improvement (Figure 2, Appendix).

Regarding the ability to affect change in the region, 77% of participants indicated their ability greatly improved or improved, while 18% indicated slight improvement (Figure 3, Appendix).

One of the goals of MGRLC is to identify opportunities and articulate a future vision for Middle Georgia during the program. To assess the level to which the program is in alignment with meeting this goal, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the program equipped them to make their region better. You will see in Figure 4 in the Appendix that 100% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they are equipped to make the middle Georgia region better.

In regards to the short-term outcome of “more engaged citizens,” the question “I plan to become involved in regional leadership efforts because of this program,” was asked of the 2020 cohort. Out of the 20 responses, 19 participants said ‘yes,’ they plan to become involved in regional leadership because of MGRLC. This cohort has also begun a financial literacy program for youth in the Middle Georgia region to address quality of life/the poverty cycle. Participants are planning to partner with local banks to open checking accounts for youth in the region to help increase their financial literacy. This is the only cohort to take on such a project and is a direct result of participation in the MGRLC program.

Content analysis of the qualitative data showed themes consistent with the leadership skills and knowledge delivered through the Fanning-facilitated sessions across cohorts. The most frequently referenced skills were collaboration/thinking regionally, communicating effectively, and relationship-building/networking. The following paragraphs will provide direct quotes from past participants in regards to their leadership knowledge/skills gained.

To measure the intermediate outcomes of the program, participants were asked to list specific skills and/or concepts learned from MGRLC and how they will apply the knowledge. Participants said the following regarding collaboration/thinking regionally:

“The importance of collaboration. In order to accomplish a task we need all members working together to get the job done. Nothing is accomplished alone.” (2020)

“I am committed to working collaborative with other regional leaders to evolve/address major challenges in the region.” (2017)

“Speaking positively about my region. Identifying the strengths of the counties in the region and making suggestions on where each county can partner to build up the region as a whole.” (2018)

When asked to list specific skills and/or concepts learned from MGRLC and how they will apply the knowledge, participants said the following regarding communicating effectively:

“Open lines of communication between regional leaders and the ability to address the uncomfortable topics.” (2017)

“Identifying my audience. Communicating on a level in which my points will be best received.” (2018)

When asked to list specific skills and/or concepts learned from MGRLC and how they will apply the knowledge, participants said the following regarding relationship-building:

“Working with other communities to address issues that impact citizens regionally. Relationships are so important in addressing issues that are causing situation for citizens.” (2019)

“I am committed to stay more connected to the members of this group and the needs of the region.” (2017)

Additionally, there were statements that summarized the overall intention of the program, to grow and advance Middle Georgia through collaboration. Participants said the following:

“...with as much information as I’ve got here, I’m going to take it and spread it, I’m going to wear my shirt when I go out when I’m doing things in the community so they know I was in the Middle Georgia Regional Leadership Champions and I think it’s a good thing if you hear about it, but this is what we are trying to do, it’s not just a city thing anymore, it’s about a whole region.” (2018)

“I see myself as someone who values inclusivity, partnerships, and tangible outcomes. My ability to engage people from the business community, government, and impoverished communities allows me to be a bridge for dialogue and communication. I now see myself as a catalyst for improving economic prosperity, education, and quality of life in Middle Georgia.” (2018)

“Through this program I have learned more information on what it takes to take this region forward.” (2020)

Finally, to address the intermediate goals we asked the question, “What are you committed to doing as a community leader?” In response, participants stated:

“To participate actively within the region and encourage others to do the same.” (2019)

“I now have the confidence to be more involved and actively participate in my region, in more than just my bubble/area.” (2020)

“I learned to expand the reach to the whole region, not just where I work and live. [I will] maintain a vision that will benefit the Middle Georgia Region.” (2017)

“I [will be] at the table of discussion and an agent of change. I will engage others and be a role model for the change. I want to see collaboration affect my community as well as the communities around me. I will make my region better.” (2018)

“I will be able to skillfully lead and represent members of my community while working with colleagues and relationships I have made in my class. This way I can represent what my community wants while letting the region now and [explaining] how we all work together.” (2018)

SECTION 5

IMPLICATIONS & NEXT STEPS

Studies such as this are extremely important in filling a gap in regional leadership literature. The overall results of the MGRCLC program are extremely positive. The short-term outcome of increased knowledge was met, as was the goal of creating more engaged citizens. The qualitative statements above are the types of things that a regional program hopes to hear from its graduates and show that intermediate outcomes are also being met. A graduate of the inaugural class (2015) said this, “The leadership training helps you think about your strengths and how you can apply those in helping the region succeed. I have also benefited from the relationships I built through the program. It is a wonderful asset for middle Georgia.” This statement shows that participants not only found value in the program but now have the confidence, skills and relationships to go out into the region and help move it forward through a collaborative process.

The next step for this study is to host focus groups and/or interviews with the most recent cohort to determine if the intermediate goals are being met, which are: 1) increased participation in leadership positions in the community and 2) increased collaboration between counties in Middle Georgia. In addition to the focus groups/interviews, graduates will be given the post-test again to determine the amount of leadership skill knowledge retained. These tasks will take place at six (6) months post-graduation (May 2021). Additionally, to measure long-term societal outcomes, the 2020 graduates will be contacted at twelve (12) months post-graduation (November 2021) to obtain information about new leadership positions or collaborations between counties within the middle Georgia region.

Figure 2

MY KNOWLEDGE OF MY ROLE AS A LEADER IN THE REGION HAS:

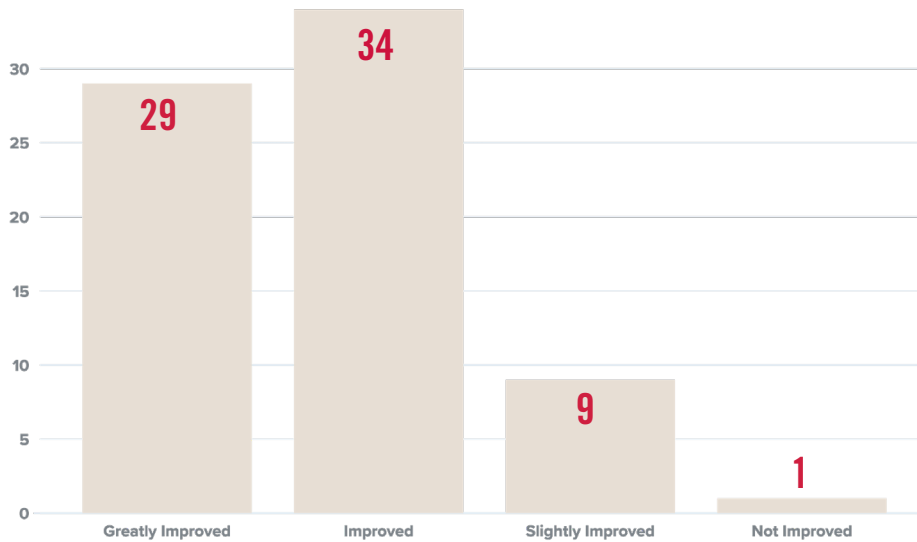


Figure 3

MY ABILITY TO AFFECT CHANGE IN MY REGION HAS:

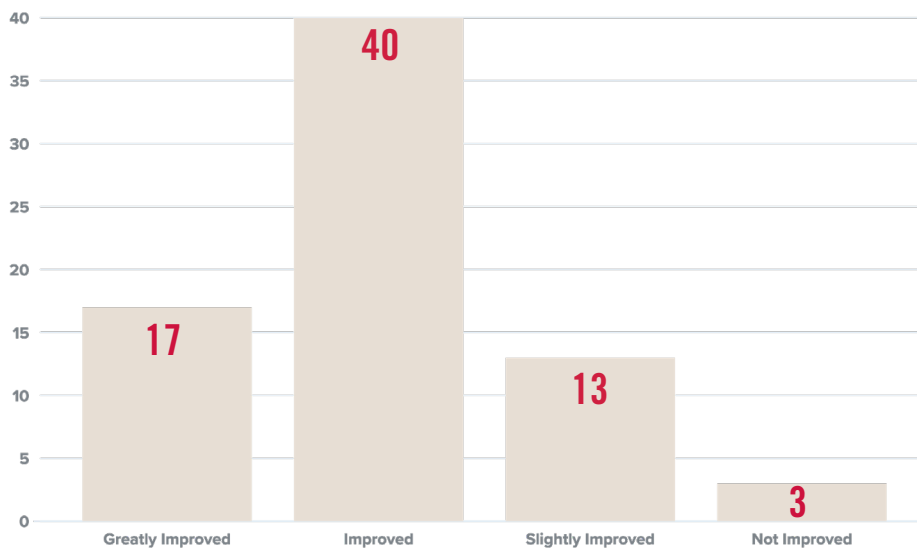
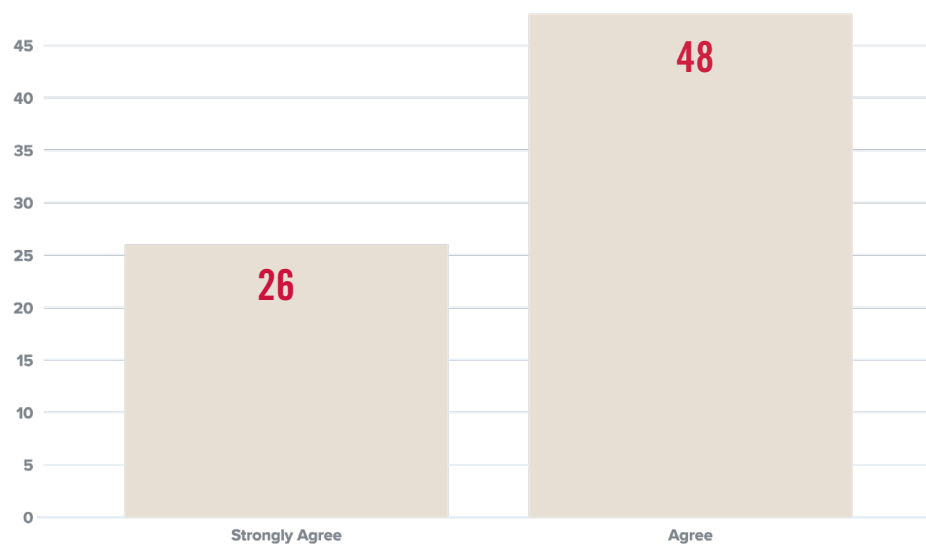


Figure 4

I AM EQUIPPED TO MAKE MY REGION BETTER:





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