

RULE (Rural-Urban Leadership) Pennsylvania, a program of Penn State Extension, is a unique initiative that brings together a cross-section of Pennsylvanians to learn about issues affecting our commonwealth. Participants in RULE explore public issue engagement, interorganizational networking, effective public decision-making, strategic design, and sustainable relationships.

Active in every county, RULE works to build bridges and foster understanding of Pennsylvania's divergent rural and urban issues. Although the program has a strong focus on issues affecting rural Pennsylvania, study institutes are held in both rural and urban areas. The program places a strong emphasis on communication because communication skills are critical for all leaders, regardless of county of origin.

A LINKED COMMITMENT

Through a two-year program that includes ten study institutes, RULE instills values such as leadership through life-long learning, commitment to national and international outreach, diverse viewpoints and populations, challenge, and change. Participants from diverse backgrounds and all lifestyles—farmers and agribusiness, community leaders and government officials, business and private industries, health professionals and educators—come together with different interests and goals but a linked commitment to solving community problems.

"The common denominator of people drawn to RULE is demonstrable

attention to quality of life and making a difference in their community," says JD Dunbar, senior extension educator and program director for RULE. "Whether it stems from their families where they love, places where they worship, or their communities where they serve, RULE participants are interested in being agents of change."

Participants in RULE also are changed themselves along the way as they engage in the program. They improve their self-image, increase their confidence, and become focused on achieving their goals and objectives. They improve their skills in listening, nurturing, and dealing with conflict. In turn, they can apply these new skills to issues and problems facing their organizations and communities.

"We want to broaden participants' horizons, and a big part of that is exposing those not from an agricultural background to agricultural practices and public issues while connecting them to RULE-mates who are from different forums of agriculture," Dunbar says. "Because we are an extension program, we are favorably hewn to the land-grant mission of Penn State and the College of Agricultural Sciences."

ALUMNI NETWORK

With an alumni network of more than 600, RULE has a strong presence in Pennsylvania. Alumni form close bonds not only within their own class, but with other graduates of the program. "Every class has a different dynamic, but each class forms a closeness. Everyone will tell you that they were in the best class," says Dunbar, who herself is a RULE alum.

"One of the powerful aspects of RULE is that it's very individually oriented," Dunbar continues. "We perform layered self-assessments—the first question participants answer is, Who am I and why am I in RULE? When you have to speak about yourself, it makes you really reflect. These assessments help participants know themselves better as well as enhance their communication skills. Every person also completes an individual learning contract and is assigned a mentor—a leader in Pennsylvania who is there to help you accomplish your goal. And we have seen people make life-changing transitions in their careers as a result of accomplishing the goals they set in RULE."



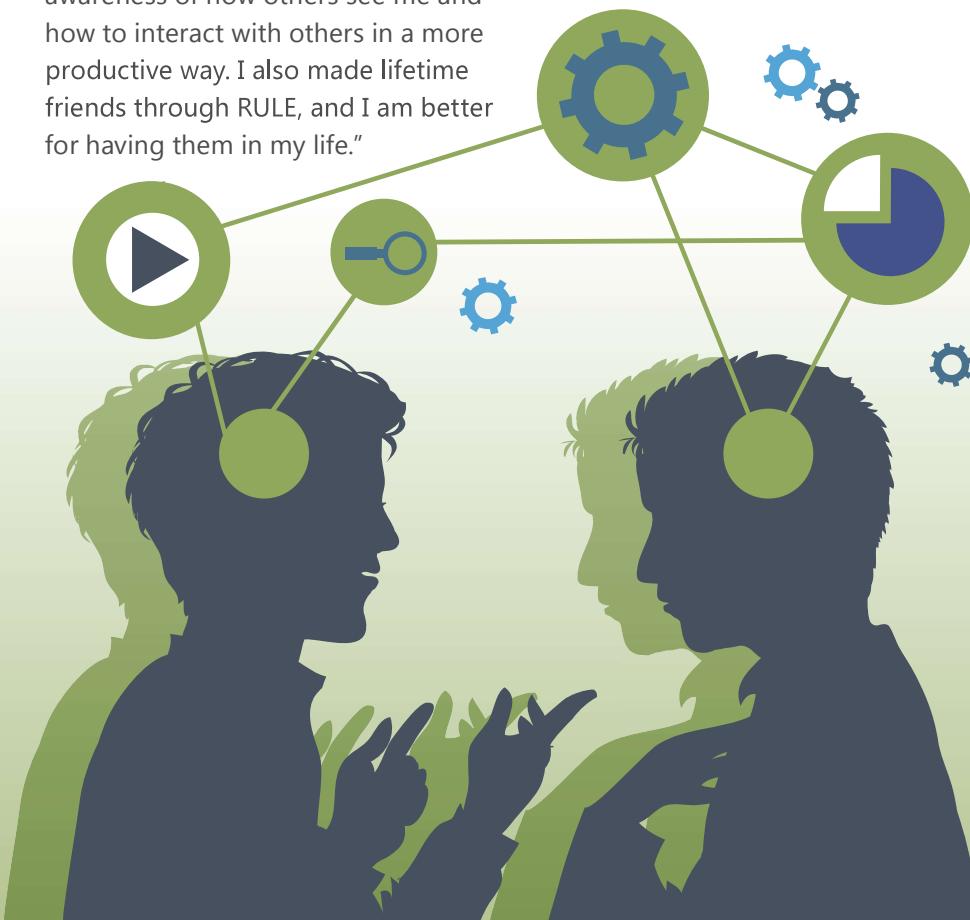
Read on to hear from RULE participants about how the program has had a positive impact on their lives and careers:

State Representative Donna Oberlander (63rd District) was a county commissioner when she joined RULE. During the program, she set a goal to be chair of the Clarion County commissioners—a goal that she achieved. She then went on, with the support of her RULE class, to be elected a Pennsylvania state representative. “RULE encouraged me to write down my goals and have a plan to achieve them,” she says. “It also opened my eyes to the diversity of our state and the need to work together to take advantage of our great opportunities and work to solve our challenges. I was impressed with the variety and quality of the study institutes and the opportunities they presented. I learned so much about myself—for example, my personality traits and how I deal with issues and other people. I gained greater awareness of how others see me and how to interact with others in a more productive way. I also made lifetime friends through RULE, and I am better for having them in my life.”

Rick Vilello, deputy secretary for Community Affairs and Development and executive director of the Department of Community & Economic Development’s Governor’s Center for Local Government, credits his success in government to RULE. Vilello, who served as mayor of Lock Haven from 2000 to 2015, says the connections he made through the program have proven invaluable as he networks with other elected officials. “I was hesitant to apply for RULE at first,” he says. “But it turns out it was the right timing, and my wife encouraged me. As I continued through the program, I was surprised at how all-encompassing it is. It’s not just public speaking or professional development—it’s a little bit of everything. RULE showed me that I could make a difference. I came away with a confidence I didn’t have before. In fact, I wouldn’t have had the courage to run for mayor of Lock Haven. I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing now if it weren’t for RULE.”

When **freelance writer and translator Hilary Hauck** came to RULE she was looking to improve her leadership skills. “I was a board member for a statewide writers’ organization, Pennwriters, and I had recently launched a local group for writers called The Inkwell,” Hauck says. “Despite having a background in teaching, I didn’t feel confident when managing events or speaking in public. I also felt I could do more for my local community and my writing community, but I wasn’t sure how to go about it. Because of the confidence I gained through RULE, earlier this year I was honored to be elected as president of Pennwriters. Before RULE I would have been overwhelmed, but now I am prepared for the responsibility. RULE has given me a new perspective—I now approach challenges with strategy, and with the knowledge that I’m not going it alone. We all became like family very quickly—a family of people who are very different from each other, but all with something valuable to share.”

Diane Porter, outreach specialist for State Representative Donna Oberlander, was first introduced to RULE through the representative. “Donna was a graduate of RULE and thought it would benefit me, so I decided to apply,” she says. “By the end of the first session, when twenty-six of us came together from all over Pennsylvania, we were all good friends. The program has had a huge impact on me, both in my work environment and in my personal life. I am more confident when walking into a room full of strangers, and believe that I have become a better asset at work. RULE has helped me to think outside the box, and for that I am deeply grateful.”



For more information about RULE, visit <http://extension.psu.edu/community/rule>.