



** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/karl-35-year-impact-survey>

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Survey: Rural leadership program has ‘overwhelming’ impact on Kansas communities

KARL program celebrates 35 years of service to agriculture, rural life

K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – A survey that touches on 35 years of experiences by graduates and supporters of a rural leadership program in Kansas indicates evidence of its progress in strengthening the state’s communities.

Officials with the nonprofit [Kansas Agriculture and Rural Leadership program](#) said the results portray an “overwhelming response that the KARL program has built capacity to lead change, expand personal and professional networks, increase community engagement and increase knowledge of Kansas agriculture and issues impacting rural Kansas communities.”

“My experience changed my path in life,” said Sara Dawson, KARL Class XII rancher and business owner from Florence, Kansas. “Through KARL, I began learning about business structures and now had the business exposure to ask myself some tough questions and to think outside the box. Rather than rely on just our generational family business, my husband and I started our own business. It was a time in my life full of new thinking, approaches, and growth. You can’t be afraid of change.”

Established in 1990, the first KARL Class was launched in 1991. Since then, more than 450 leaders have graduated from the program. The 17th class was named in June 2024.

“For decades, we’ve known — intuitively and through countless stories — just how transformative the KARL experience is,” said Jill Zimmerman, KARL president. “To mark the 35th anniversary, we felt it was time to take a deeper, more detailed look at how those leading, supporting, and going through the KARL program have made a lasting impact on our communities, industries and state.”

The study conducted surveys of 154 KARL graduates and supporters. It held 29 in-depth interviews to capture the stories of how a leadership program can encourage positive growth in

Kansas communities and industries. All 16 KARL classes were represented in the surveys, with 77% identifying as living in a rural area, and 81% as program graduates.

The impact study noted dozens of KARL graduates who have risen to state and national service, including multiple state legislators, business owners, agriculture association CEOs, and board directors. Responses highlighted how the program's seminars, experiences in communities, and interactions with industry leaders provided a foundation for expanding perspectives and new ways of thinking.

"KARL teaches humility and the importance of a team," said Ken Rahjes, KARL Class III, District 110 State Representative, and president of Authentic Ag, Inc. "The program helps us learn to diffuse situations and be better listeners. Before we make our opinion known, we listen. In Topeka, this skill has helped me communicate with those different than myself."

KARL officials note that the results indicated that it is not only the immersive and relevant program curriculum, but also the quality of the people they experience it with that makes the KARL experience valuable.

"KARL friends, fellows, staff and the volunteer board of directors, work to create an environment where leaders can grow alongside peers who challenge and inspire them," said Bill Brown of Wamego, board chair. "The impact of the KARL program over the past 35 years is a testament to the power of leadership, collaboration and grassroots support."

To learn more about the KARL program, read the impact report and follow along with Class XVII seminars, visit karlprogram.com or call [785-532-6300](tel:785-532-6300). Applications for KARL Class XVIII will be posted in January, 2026.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Kansas Agriculture and Rural Leadership, <https://karlprogram.com>

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