

HIGHLANDER RESEARCH AND EDUCATION CENTER

Environmental Economic Program (EEP)

New Market, Tennessee

People were in pretty bad shape. But at Highlander we learned how to handle our daily problems, to do by organizing, by showing our power and our strength . . . The most important thing the people ever learned from Highlander was how we could help ourselves.

—Henry Thomas
*Unearthing Seeds of Fire:
The Idea of Highlander*

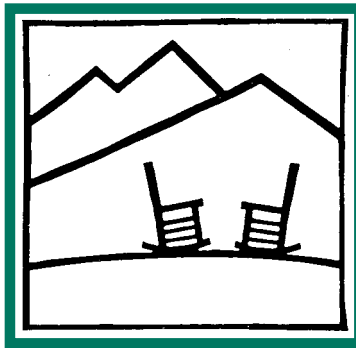
Located on a farm in the Smoky Mountains in East Tennessee the Highlander Research and Education Center, formerly the Highlander Center, began in 1932. For over half a century it has helped individuals to empower themselves through an effective process of learning and discovery that evolved under the tutelage and dedication of one of its founders, the late Myles Horton, and many others. Its participatory learning approach has proven to be a very effective means for persons from all different backgrounds to begin to think in new ways and to apply the information to local issues that they choose to address.

Over the decades Highlander has been known principally for its work on social change and education in the areas of labor, civil rights and Appalachian issues. In 1981 a PBS documentary featuring the work of Highlander was presented by Bill Moyers. In 1982, the Center was nominated for a Nobel Peace prize in recognition of its work on behalf of human rights.

Highlander works mainly with community groups in Appalachia and the deep South, servicing the areas not usually served by mainstream programs: the coal hollows of eastern Kentucky, the coastal regions of South Carolina, and Native American and growing Hispanic communities in the southern region. This is an area that continues to lead the nation in poverty: the South has over half the nation's persistently poor rural counties and the highest

percentage of the nation's working poor. Because of the difficult working conditions and environmental degradation in these communities, Highlander has been developing programs that integrate both economic and environmental strategies.

Highlander's board and staff reflect the diverse cultures it serves. Half the Board are people of color and its staff reflects racial and gender diversity. Highlander's support is primarily from individual donations and grants from foundations and churches. It also receives revenues from the sales of its publications and rental of its facilities.



Facilitating change

Highlander conducts residential workshops, provides ongoing technical assistance, helps organizations network, and carries out field work in communities. It has an extensive resource center in New Market which is available to individuals and groups. Through its participatory research program it documents local cultures. Through its youth and internship programs it helps to develop future leaders.

In the 1990s it has begun to link issues and constituencies in a broader context. It describes its programs as multi-issue, multi-cultural and inter-generational. These include:

- An Environmental Economic Education Program
- A Community Environmental Health Program
- Southern Appalachian Leadership Training Program
- Culture and Diversity Initiative
- Global Education Project
- A Residential Education Program

Environmental Economic Program (EEP)

In 1989 a new initiative was created to link economic and environmental issues and programs. Formerly segmented programs were coordinated under a single

program. The goal of this program is to bring together individuals from diverse communities to analyze their problems, share ideas, learn from each other's experiences, and to develop action plans that can be implemented in their own communities.

In each periodic cycle, three to seven community-based organizations are selected, which represent a wide range of issues. For practical reasons, most of the selected representatives are from the nearby region. The selection process is competitive and staff members make site visits to assess the organization's capability and commitment to carry out a project.

The number of participants depends on the availability of funding. Each organization commits to attend five weekend workshops and to develop and implement a project in their community that will contribute to its long-term sustainability. For example, they have examined such issues as the cleanup of abandoned PCB dumps, explored the feasibility of rural recycling programs, and identified opportunities for using organic agriculture to save black-owned family farms.

One indication of the growing effectiveness of this program is the increase in numbers of applications received and the numbers of organizations that are willing to commit the time and resources necessary to participate. For most organizations this is a significant outlay of time and resources, especially those staffed by volunteers. Common limitations include lack of funding and personnel and adequate background in leadership training. Each organization receives a stipend up to \$4,000 to cover expenses.

Most of the workshops take place at Highlander but every attempt is made to schedule one or two in one of the participating organization's neighborhood. This has the benefit of increasing understanding of local conditions as well as cultural, racial and ethnic issues.

Recent participating groups included one in West Virginia located in an area that has suffered from economic and environmental degradation as a result of coal mining. As a result of Highlander's training, this group has been able to galvanize the community to rebuild the sewer system and other parts of the infrastructure. In Atlanta, another group in a low to middle income neighborhood successfully had a nearby site redesignated from a proposed landfill into a neighborhood park.

Although it is difficult to document or

even evaluate some of the outcomes that result from this practical, hands-on process, there seems to be a greater application of integrative thinking in strategic project development and problem-solving. Another change that is occurring is greater long-term thinking. This is important as our society and institutions encourage and reward short-term approaches that may work for the near term but do not develop the foundation nor invite the widespread participation that can offer more permanence and chance of long-range sustainability.

In April 1993, Highlander brought together fifteen groups to evaluate the impact of the program. In addition to the training, many have found Highlander's publications to be extremely valuable in developing and implementing their projects. Some of the groups with whom it has worked include Rural Action, the Community Farm Alliance, Jesus People Against Pollution and Americans for a Clean Environment.

Catalyst for other initiatives

Some of the groups who have benefited from Highlander's training have proceeded to form other organizations. One example is the Coalition for Jobs and the Environment which led to the creation of the Clinch Powell Sustainable Development Forum, a regional consortium of community organizations, small businesses and public agencies in southwestern Virginia and upper east Tennessee. With assistance from the Virginia Center on Rural Development, the Forum is working to help communities meet their needs; establish ecologically sensitive businesses, promote sustainable livelihoods, and sustain local resources. Since its inception in 1993 it has created the Highlands Bio-Produce Network; eco-log, an alternative forestry and wood products company; several microenterprises; and the development of a nature tourism plan.

The STP Schools: Education for Environmental Action

Through a related program, the STP leadership workshops, begun in 1989, have brought together over 800 people from 45 states and a number of other countries. The goal of these workshops is to help community leaders become more effective in addressing local environmental problems by linking them with other participants working on related issues. Participants have included factory workers, teenagers and

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Scope: Rural areas in the Appalachian region and the deep South

Inception Date: 1932

Participants: Individuals, nonprofit organizations, Latino, African American and Native American communities

Project type: Leadership development/training, community development, coalition building

Methods used: Residential education, adult leadership training, workshops, resource and financial support

Lessons learned: Solutions come from the people. Effectiveness of convening individuals from diverse backgrounds and interests.

retirees, teachers, miners, Latinos, Native Americans and African Americans.

With little access to money and information, what these individuals need most is to learn from each others' experiences, about ways they can help each other, and about approaches that work. In each workshop they share ideas and brainstorm practical actions that they can apply locally.

Challenges

While most of the focus is on the poorer areas of Appalachia and the South, increasingly Highlander has found it important to build bridges with grassroots groups working on similar issues in other parts of the country and the world. Although an impact may be local, the cause is frequently way beyond regional and national borders. In this regard, groups facing common challenges are linked in order to learn from each other and contribute to the greater public dialogue. One of the greatest challenges is

developing long enough range programs to help build community.

—CONCERN, Inc.



UPDATE

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In 1995 the Highlander Center began a strategic planning process to integrate program design and implementation. The goal is to develop a holistic program for the organization and to provide an institutional framework for its programs. This process includes seeking comments from groups and individuals who have participated in Highlander's activities and incorporating their feedback into the center's programs. This effort has not only brought community groups to Highlander, but also brought Highlander's workshops and curricula into communities.

The Center's new Democracy in Schools program addresses citizen apathy in the democratic process. Discussion topics include: "Why don't people vote?" and "How can we create policies that people want in communities?" The environment and economics program has evolved into an Economics Education program designed to help individuals apply economic principles to everyday decisions. Project leaders have compiled an educational booklet, which includes resources from groups nationwide that teach real-life economics.

A major obstacle is the increased fragility of community connections. Not only have people less available time, but there is a lack of natural support systems, communication, and even public gathering places. This results in increased self-isolation, which directly affects Highlander's ability to bring groups to their center: the "groups" simply do not exist or do not have the time and commitment to spend weekends or vacation days working on Highlander's activities. Nevertheless, Highlander continues its outreach into minority communities. The center has made contact with farm workers groups and is holding multi-cultural workshops with Latinos, African-Americans and Native Americans. Hiring at least one Spanish-speaking staff person within the year will assist the outreach efforts in these communities.

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