In early August, we announced that the Nebraska LEAD Program would be pausing for one season. So, instead of convening Class 39 in Chadron to begin their second year and selecting, announcing, and meeting with the members of Class 40 on East Campus, we are using this year to rejuvenate and innovate.

During this “fallow” year, our “field” will not be producing our accustomed crop of leaders this season, but you will find the LEAD staff and the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council board members engaged in an all-out effort to replenish the soil from which our leadership classes emerge. Meanwhile, our over 1,100 LEAD alumni will not be pausing. Instead, they will continue to provide leadership at the local, state, and national levels for our agricultural industry and beyond.

For new life to spring from fallowed ground, we must know what you and your organizations need from LEAD. With your input, we will then be able to create new and meaningful ways of achieving our mission to cultivate leaders who communicate, collaborate, inspire, and serve. Enhancements will create more opportunities for skills development and introduce new concepts to the curriculum. With your support, we are turning an unprecedented challenge into an unprecedented opportunity!

With Dr. Blezek’s passing on July 6, we lost a great man. For me personally, Dr. Blezek was my college professor, colleague, LEAD Director, mentor . . . but most of all, he was my friend. This issue of The LEAD Review is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Allen G. Blezek. May his leadership legacy live on through each one of us.

In closing, I am blessed to work with such fine people and I thank you for allowing me the honor and privilege to serve as the Director of the Nebraska LEAD Program. Take care, stay healthy, and be safe.
A Message From the Chair of the Board

In late November of 2019 I was talking with a group of farmers and agribusiness people. The issues of the floods of 2019, the terrible planting season, the poor prices, etc. led one person to say, “I can’t wait until 2019 is over and we can move on to 2020.” That reminded me of the old saying, “be careful of what you ask for… because you may get it.”

Well 2020 arrived, and boy have we gotten it. As all of you know the changes that occurred since mid-March have been dramatic and will probably change how we do certain things forever.

Certainly, the pandemic has impacted the Nebraska LEAD Program in a significant way. The graduation banquet for LEAD 38 was canceled on the very eve of the event. The final first-year seminar for LEAD 38 was moved online and these are just the first major changes in the program.

The Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council Board spent a significant amount of time this summer studying the best course of action in these unsettled times. After considerable thought and discussion, the Board reached the consensus that it was prudent and responsible to “pause” the LEAD Program for one year.

The Board reached this decision based on two major concerns; the health and safety of LEAD staff and fellows and their respective families, and the inability to provide the quality of programming that we have all come to expect. Due to the meeting restrictions and a whole host of other logistical complications the Board felt like we could not offer the true LEAD experience to the fellows, so a “pause” year was the best option.

While we regret this, there are a couple of positives that will come out of this pause in programming. One of these is the fact that Terry and his staff will be able to offer LEAD 39 fellows some additional educational opportunities virtually. This will not replace their second-year program, but rather enhance it. Secondly, we will be doing a deep dive into the entire LEAD Program to study how we can make the program even better.

Our goal is to come out of this “pause” year with a program that continues to be the premier agricultural leadership development program in the nation, and a program that is positioned to maintain that role well into the future.

Finally, I want to thank Terry, his staff and the Board for all the work that has been done this past six months as we adjust to this new era.

I also want to thank all of our generous sponsors for your support of our Nebraska LEAD Program.

Our New Board Members

Mary Eisenzimmer

I was raised on the family farm in Big Springs, Nebraska and enjoyed driving grain cart for wheat harvest and working on the farm in the summers. I participated in the 4-H program for 10 years showing cattle, sheep and completing various static projects. The time I spent on the farm with my parents and our family tradition in the 4-H program influenced my passion and career in agriculture.

I was a member of LEAD XXX and I am currently the Recruiting Manager for 21st Century Equipment the John Deere dealership in Ogallala. I have been employed with the dealership for 20 years since moving home to the family farm from Norfolk, Nebraska where I was a territory manager for John Deere Company. I attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln majoring in Agribusiness and Ag Education. My husband Keith manages the farm along with my mother and I help out as much as possible. We have two daughters; Makenna is a Senior at Ogallala High School and Kallie is in the 8th grade.

I enjoy spending time with my family on the farm and attending the girls’ activities. They are both very active in 4-H and FFA. Kallie participates in sports, horse shows, rodeos, and is currently the Ogallala Rodeo Princess. Makenna is expanding her 4-H swine project into a show pig breeding business as part of her FFA SAE. She competed this past year on the Nebraska Vet Science team at National FFA and is currently a member of the Nebraska Farm Bureau “The Crew.” I have been a member of the Rotary Club of Ogallala for 15 years serving in various positions, currently am the President of the Keith County 4-H Program and Secretary/Treasurer of the Keith County Farm Bureau. In my free time I enjoy jogging, camping, and boating at Lake McConaughy.

Jessica Groskopf

I am a Regional Agricultural Economist and the Director of the Nebraska Women in Agriculture at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. I have been recognized for my Extension programming by Nebraska Extension, UNL Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Western Agricultural Economics Association, and the National Association of County Agricultural Agents with various awards.

Being 400 miles from Lincoln makes me intimately aware of the unique challenges of farming in the high plains, and of being a rural Nebraskan. My husband, Andy, and I farm north of Scottsbluff, where we grow corn and dry edible beans.

As Director of the Nebraska Women in Agriculture Program, I know how important it is to have women in agricultural leadership roles in Nebraska. One-third of farm/ranch operators are female. However, many of our state’s agriculture boards (Cooperatives, Commodity, Natural Resource Districts, etc.) do not reflect this diversity. I was a member of LEAD 33 and know firsthand that the Nebraska LEAD Program provides training and networking opportunities that are invaluable to the next generation of agricultural leaders in the state, especially women.

Bobbie Kriz-Wickham

I am a native of Geddes, South Dakota, where I grew up on a diversified family farm. That family farm is still in operation today; jointly run by my older brother, nephew and dad. They raise cattle, sheep, corn, soybeans, wheat and alfalfa, and contract feed hogs and do some custom haying.

I am a graduate of South Dakota State University (Go Jacks!), with degrees in journalism and political science. My first job out of college brought me to Kearney, Nebraska, and I have lived in the state ever since.

I moved to Lincoln in 1999 and secured a position as policy analyst for the Nebraska Department of Agriculture. I held that role for 10 years before being promoted to assistant director of the department. I served in that position for about six years before leaving to take my current job as public affairs and outreach coordinator for the Nebraska USDA Farm Service Agency.

I live in Lincoln with my husband, Kevin, and son, Kade, who is a junior at Lincoln Southeast High School. When I am not at work or spending time with my family, you can find me outdoors doing any kind of fitness, fishing, or tending to my flowers.

Scott Richert

My wife, Monica, and I farm in the Gresham, NE area. We have four children. Melissa is a RN working in Sioux Falls, SD. Kyle is a junior at Mount Marty in Yankton, SD. Amy is a freshman at Concordia in Seward, NE. Trey is a sophomore at Nebraska Lutheran in Waco, NE.

I attended Southeast Community College in Beatrice and graduated with a degree in Ag Business. I was a member of LEAD XXI.
Allen G. Blezek

Allen Gerald Blezek was born August 16, 1945 at Hamburg, Iowa, and passed from this world on July 6, 2020, in Lincoln, Nebraska, after a courageous battle with cancer.

Allen was the youngest of three children born to Clair and Dorothy (Dodd) Blezek of Randolph, Iowa, and grew up on the family farm located 3 miles south of Randolph. Allen attended grade school at the Randolph Consolidated School and then graduated from the Fremont-Mills Community High School in Tabor, Iowa, in 1962. He was a lifelong member of the Randolph Presbyterian Church. In addition to helping his parents on the family farm, he also worked on neighboring farms earning money to attend college. He graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with a Bachelor’s Degree in Agricultural Education in 1966 and then returned to Fremont County (Iowa) where he taught Vocational Agriculture in the Hamburg Public Schools for six years. During this time, he received his Master’s Degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1968.

Allen left teaching in Hamburg to complete the residency requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy Degree from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and was awarded a PhD in 1973. After a short time as Coordinator of Career Education with the Lincoln (NE) Public Schools, he joined the staff in the Department of Agricultural Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. At the University, he was responsible for the Development of the Nebraska Vocational Agriculture Core Curriculum, which was distributed to all high schools with Ag programs throughout Nebraska. He was a classroom teacher and became active in campus politics. He soon was recognized with the university-wide Distinguished Teaching Award and later became president of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Faculty Senate. He also served as a Unit Administrator as the Department Head of Agricultural Education for eight years and founding Director of the Center for Leadership Development beginning in 1988. He also served as director of the Nebraska LEAD Program from 1984 until his retirement. He had many opportunities to travel throughout his career, traveling to some 90 countries one or more times. His first travels were to India, as he was named a Rotary Group Study “Fellow” in the early 1980s. Because of this he always felt particularly close to Rotary and his Lincoln Northeast Rotary Club friends. Another of his favorite travels was, with then University of Nebraska President Ronald Roskens, to the Peoples Republic of China also in the early 1980s. More recently he has served as president of the Nebraska Vocational Agricultural Foundation, the Nebraska FFA Foundation, and the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council. He was a member of the Agriculture Builders of Nebraska, a past member and vice president of the Nebraska Farm Bureau Foundation, past president of the Nebraska Rural Radio Foundation, past president of the University of Nebraska Emeriti Association, past member and board president of the Lancaster County Extension Board, and a member, honoree and board member of the Nebraska Hall of Ag Achievement.

Allen was united in marriage to Kay Walker Boone on June 20, 1992. They enjoyed entertaining friends in their home, attending and participating in community events, and had many opportunities to travel together throughout the United States and the world.

Allen is survived by his wife Kay; step children Tony Boone and wife Ann of Omaha, Nebraska, and Lisa Holmes and husband Brian of Shenandoah, Iowa. Grandchildren Payton Boone and Brianna, Adrianna and Evan Holmes; sister-in-law Judith Blezek of Glenwood, Iowa; brothers and sisters-in-law Linda and Mike Burnison; Brian and Christy Walker and Clay and Kim Walker all of Essex, Iowa, along with a host of nieces, nephews, cousins and friends.

Allen was proceeded in death by his parents Clair and Dorothy Blezek, sister and brother-in-law Marilyn and Bill Rhodes and brother Donald Blezek.
Blezek Memorial LEAD Fellowship Fund Is Established

Dear Friends:

I am pleased to share that the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association, in partnership with the University of Nebraska Foundation and with the full support from Kay Blezek, her family, and the Nebraska Agricultural Leadership Council has launched a campaign to endow the new Dr. Allen G. Blezek memorial LEAD Fellowship Fund.

In more than two decades as Program Director, Dr. Blezek left an indelible mark on this program and on the agricultural community in Nebraska. He led 24 classes of agricultural professionals in life-changing leadership development activities. More than 700 alumni today can point to his positive influence on their careers, skills, and lifelong friendships.

We aim to raise a total of $100,000 so that this fund, when fully endowed and invested, will provide a permanent source of funding to support a LEAD Fellow’s participation each year for decades to come; helping to cover the cost of travel and educational programming for another generation of outstanding individuals. In uncertain economic times, this type of endowed funding ensures that the LEAD Program can continue to invest in future leaders who will grow their skills and build on Nebraska’s unique strengths.

Several of you have contributed to the memorial fund following Dr. Blezek’s passing on July 6. Thank you. We have included a donation information envelope in this newsletter if you have not had a chance to do so or if you chose to provide an additional contribution.

Thank you for generously making your gift or multi-year pledge today so that we can announce a fully endowed fund the next time we are together for our annual LEAD banquet. Your support will go far to honor Dr. Blezek and strengthen the Nebraska LEAD Program for the future.

I would like to thank Nancy Eberle, Executive Secretary; Matt Dolch, President and the Nebraska LEAD Alumni Association Board of Directors as well as Craig Buescher, Barbara Soderlin, and Josh Egley at the University of Nebraska Foundation for taking the LEAD in honoring Dr. Blezek.

For more information or for assistance with gifts of grain, stock or other assets, please contact me or call Barbara Soderlin at the University of Nebraska Foundation at 402-670-0095.

Terry Hejny, LEAD XX
Director, Nebraska LEAD Program
Vote
Shana Gerdes

Leaders vote; they encourage others to vote. Leaders do not sit on the sidelines and say, “I don’t like either candidate, so I’m not going to bother.” Take the time to visit sites like justfacts.votesmart.org, Ballotpedia.org, or factcheck.org and other non-biased sites that are on the web to help you make informed decisions. Make a pros and cons list if need be and vote for whomever comes out on top. You can use this link to check registration, polling place, and if your ballot was received and accepted: https://www.votercheck.nebraska.gov/VoterView.

We owe it to ourselves, our families, and particularly to those who serve in our military, to take our civic duty seriously. Be a leader. Go vote and encourage others to do the same!

Condolences

The Nebraska LEAD Program mourns the loss of... Dennis Kahl, LEAD IX who passed away on August 13, and the family of Mark McKee, LEAD X who passed away of September 4.

In addition, we pass on our condolences to the family of Fred Bruning (LEAD IV) on the passing of his father; the family of Bob Rikli (LEAD XII) on the passing of his father; the family of Susan Arp (LEAD XVIII) on the passing of her husband and the family of Jason (LEAD 33) and Jennifer (LEAD 36) Arp on the passing of Jason’s father; the family of Cory Kudlacek (LEAD 37) on the passing of his father; the family of John Lange (LEAD XXV) on the passing of his mother; the family of Bill Luckey (LEAD XIX) on the passing of his mother; and the family of Deb Heidzig (LEAD XVII) on the passing of her husband and the family of Sarah Heidzig-Kraeger (LEAD XXVIII) on the passing of her father.

Congratulations to:
- Lindsey Hackel (LEAD XXVIII) and Brian Putnam who were married on May 23, 2020.
- Laurel Mastro (LEAD 39) and Michael Daugherty who were married on August 22, 2020.
- Alyssa (LEAD 32) and Nathan Johnston on the birth of their daughter, Charlotte Jayne on May 11, 2020.
- Travis (LEAD 39) and Shawna Harrison on the birth of their son, Jack James on May 21, 2020.
- Kenny (LEAD 33) and Jennifer Smith on the birth of their son, Anthony John on May 22, 2020.
- Logan (LEAD 38) and Shawnee Williams on the birth of their daughter, Breckyn Irene on July 22, 2020.
- Lance (LEAD 34) and Krystal Atwater on the birth of their son, Ryker Cedric on October 1, 2020.

LEADing the Way

Kerry Hoffschneider (LEAD XXII) of Waco became the Marketing & Event Coordinator for the Intertribal Agriculture Council.

Tracy Zink (LEAD 35) of Indianola was elected to serve as the District 4 representative on the Nebraska Grain Sorghum Board.

Scott Speck (LEAD 37) of Lincoln became an Activation Manager with The Climate Corporation.

Doug Soathoff (LEAD XXV) of Trumbull was elected to a second term on the Nebraska Soybean Board of Directors representing District 7.

Brent Steinhoff (LEAD XXV) of Syracuse was elected to serve as District 5 representative on the Nebraska Soybean Board.

Cale Buhr (LEAD 38) of Trumbull was selected to participate in the Corteva Young Leader Program in conjunction with the American Soybean Association.

Scott Blehm (LEAD XXI) of Lincoln earned membership in the Million Dollar Round Table (MDRT), which is attained by life insurance advisors who meet the organization’s annual production requirement and are members of their local life underwriters’ association.

Clayton Hensley (LEAD 34) of Fremont started as a Sales Representative for AKRS Equipment.

Joan Ruskamp (LEAD XXVIII) of Dodge received the 2020 Distinguished Alumni Award by the Northwest High School Foundation in Grand Island.

Elyse Schlake (LEAD 39) of Kimball was appointed to the Extension Board for Cheyenne, Kimball, and Banner Counties.

“Yes, and...”

Cassondra Dobbs

Much to my chagrin, I have found myself studying improv this semester as part of a communications course. Mercifully, it’s not anything like Whose Line is it Anyway?! Instead, it focuses on how following the rules of improv can result in more meaningful and productive conversations.

The first rule of improv is “Yes, and...” Onstage, this would mean accepting whatever your partner says and adding to it to build the scene. In conversation, it means following the first idea for a moment to give it a chance and see where it goes. This forces the listener to wait and pay close attention to the speaker’s statement so they will know how to respond. It also prevents the listener from shutting down the conversation.

It often comes more naturally to say “no” when you disagree with someone, but practicing “Yes, and...” keeps the discussion going while building empathy and understanding. It makes others more open to your ideas if they feel theirs were really heard. It has the potential to bridge the differences holding us back.

I urge all of you to try “Yes, and...” the next time you talk with someone you don’t always see eye to eye with. Rather than crafting your rebuttal while you wait for your turn to talk, listen. Accept what they say, follow their idea for a moment, and see where it takes you both.

The Nebraska LEAD Program also mourns the loss of Frank Bruning of Bruning, who passed away on June 1. Frank, his wife, Mary and Bruning State Bank have been long-time supporters of LEAD. They have also established the Mary and Frank Bruning Endowment Fund for the Nebraska LEAD Program.
LEAD To Pause For 2020-21

What do you do when you are in the middle of a global pandemic and it’s your business to repeatedly bring together leaders from across Nebraska, in close contact, for three or more days? That’s the question the NALC Board and staff had been wrestling with since last March. In the end, it was unanimously decided to suspend regular LEAD programming and staff leaders from across Nebraska, in close contact, for three or more days.

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