Twenty-seven years ago, Paul Hornback and Rod Kuegel were young men busily trying to raise families and get their farming operations firmly established. Yet when the chance came to be in the inaugural class of an intensive agricultural leadership program, they jumped on board. That meant, commitment and sacrifice for them and their families—days away from home and work.

Kuegel and Hornback were part of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture’s Kentucky Agricultural Leadership Program, then known as the Philip Morris Agricultural Leadership Development Program. It is an intensive 18-month program designed for young agricultural producers and agribusiness people who want to be on the forefront of decisions that affect agriculture, rural communities, and society.

“I think to me the class was equal to the four years I spent at UK in terms of networking and camaraderie,” said Kuegel, a Daviess County cattle, grain, and tobacco farmer. “Of the 25 guys in the class, I’ve had business dealings with 17, and many, many of us are still very close. I was humbled to be a part of the class.”

Hornback said he saw it as an opportunity to enhance and hone his skills.

“I was taking on some leadership roles and wanted to take on a bigger role, so I committed to it, and I credit it with helping me achieve the position I’m in today.”

Hornback is the state senator representing Shelby, Bullitt, and Spencer counties in the Kentucky General Assembly. He has also served in several leadership roles in farm organizations and businesses at the state and local level.

“It gives you the skills and the desire to go forward,” said the Shelby County tobacco, cattle, and grain farmer.

Kuegel said the program taught him that good leaders cannot just represent their own views but must work for the greater good and not always take the easiest path. It was also where he learned about the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative, a group he would later lead through stormy times that included the master settlement agreement and the impending end to the federal tobacco program.

In addition to serving as co-op president for 6 1/2 years, Kuegel co-chaired President Bill Clinton’s commission on tobacco farmers and public health. In 2000, The Progressive Farmer magazine named him Man of the Year in service to Kentucky agriculture. Today, he continues to serve on boards and committees.

INVESTING IN LEADERS

The program started when Randall Barnett, who was then assistant director for UK Cooperative Extension Service, learned of a similar program in North Carolina and approached college leadership to gain support and then Philip Morris to fund it. He served as the program’s director for 10 years overseeing the first four classes.

“I saw it as a need, not something I necessarily wanted to do,” he conceded. “It would be naïve to think that some of these people wouldn’t have become leaders anyway, but they would have had to learn on the job, and that takes time. This program allows them to gain the knowledge and skills it takes to become productive leaders soon.”

The program consists of 10 three-day seminars devoted to timely issues affecting agriculture as well as improving participant’s communication, leadership, and management skills. There are also study tours to Washington, D.C. and another state and a two-week international study tour.
While initially funded by Philip Morris, the program has always been a leadership program and not commodity specific, said Larry Jones, retired agricultural economics professor and former associate dean for instruction. Jones served as director for Classes V through VIII.

The funding model and the name changed in 2007. Today more than 100 financial supporters including farm organizations, agribusinesses, program alumni, and participant fees help fund the program. Thanks to a $1 million matching grant from the Kentucky Agricultural Development Board, the program is well on its way to its goal of a $2.5 million endowment to fund it in perpetuity.

"Through this program, the $1 million investment will pay dividends for years to come," said Roger Thomas, executive director of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy, which administers the Agricultural Development Fund. "Developing and enhancing leadership skills of future leaders in our state is key to the continued success of agriculture."

Another significant contributor to the program is the Kentucky Corn Growers Association. Many of its members have been participants including Executive Director Laura Knoth.

"The organization has been supportive of KALP for many years because they want to invest in the future leaders of agriculture," said Knoth, an alumna of Class V. "Kentucky faced changes to its agriculture structure following the elimination of the federal tobacco program, yet thanks to prepared leaders such as those from KALP, it was better equipped to deal with those changes. It is amazing when you look at the program alumni and see all the leaders in organizations, associations, and communities. I continue to be impressed with the candidates for each class; it makes you confident about the future of agriculture."

"Participating in the program made me realize that it was my responsibility to give back to agriculture for what it has provided me," she said. "To be involved and stay involved, helping the industry move forward. It gives you the foundation to know that you can and should do your best to assist the entire agriculture industry, not just your part of it."

Jones said the state's agriculture industry is seeing the benefits of the program, but he thinks larger benefits are yet to come as more program participants continue to move into leadership roles.

"The bottom line of the program is that it instills self-confidence in the participants, and you can see that develop as the program progresses," he said. "It also shows them that they can make a difference. Frankly, for me serving as director, it was fantastic. In undergraduate education you generally have A, B, C students, but with this they are all top notch. As an educator it was like arriving at the pearly gates."

"The program gives people the opportunity who maybe never would have gone out and done something like this on their own—stepping out of your territory," he said. "It teaches you to be involved in all that you do—in agriculture and politics and in the community. I try to stay up on issues.

"Through not initially part of the plan, networking has become an important component. We recognize that they learn a lot from each other after the formal training sessions when they are talking to one another, sharing ideas, arguing points, or making deals—that's where the networking happens after 5 p.m.," said Steve Isaacs, UK professor of agricultural economics.

"I don't think there's been anything I've ever done that's been more fulfilling," said Snell, who as a policy specialist has spoken to every KALP class since its inception. "When you see individuals that start the program very timid—not involved—and when you see them five to 10 years down the road, it is so rewarding. I've never worked as hard on anything but never believed in anything more or had as much fun doing anything than this program."