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Educational programs for rural communities: a statewide effort in Kansas

by Joseph K. Rippetoe and Cecil James Killacky



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A voluntary association may be defined as "a group of persons relatively freely organized to pursue mutual and personal interests or to achieve common goals, usually non-profit in nature."¹ Social commentators from de Tocqueville to present-day social scientists have noted the proliferation of such associations in American society. De Tocqueville suggested that "Americans of all ages, all conditions and all dispositions, constantly form associations."²

But despite the widespread existence of these organizations, the widely-held belief that America is a nation of joiners is open to question. It has been argued that participation in voluntary associations depends upon a number of variables.³ For purposes of this article, the most important of these variables is the degree of urbanization.⁴ A fairly new concept in voluntary organization is Community Education. What follows is a brief look at one application of this concept in a distinctly rural area. The setting is Kansas and the organizer is the University for Man at Kansas State University (KSU).

University for Man and Rural Education

University for Man (UFM) is a free university-community education organization serving Manhattan, Kansas. The agency creates and develops all types of educational opportunities which are free of grades, credits, costs and prerequisites. During 1976, there were over 800 UFM courses and projects in the KSU-Manhattan area. These courses involved over 12,000 people. All courses are led by unpaid volunteers and are conducted in "free" spaces. UFM is affiliated with the Division of Continuing Education and Student Governing Association at KSU. It is further supported by the Manhattan chapter of the United Way and various grants for special projects. A more detailed explanation of the UFM program is available elsewhere.⁴

University for Man has been involved in the revitalization of community life for nine years. In the spring of 1973, the organization first began to work outside of Manhattan. A series of "town-hall" forums were conducted in three nearby communities.⁵ In essence, each community conducted a public self-analysis. The results: all three communities expressed an interest in some form of local educational program.

Many factors presented organizational problems. Both low population density and expansive physical distances contribute to an increased financial cost for social interactions. Traditionalism among the population also appears to deny the importance of many kinds of associations often found in urban industrial society.

Kansas, in the very mid-section of rural America, provides some examples of several conditions of rural life that are undergoing enormous change. The age structure of the Kansas population is undergoing a substantial shift. Flora reports that "Kansas as a whole has a general out-migration of young people in the productive age groups."⁶

⁴Some of the others are individual income level, educational level, general standard of living, vocations and whether or not the individual is a property owner.

Many small Kansas communities are declining as they become less and less able to provide full employment and full services for their members. Focusing primarily on the former, they envision industrial recruitment as the solution for retaining their youth. Unfortunately, the population problem of many Kansas communities extends far beyond the retention of young people.

Flora also points out that the "proportion of aged in Kansas is increasing," another trend contributing to the increasingly critical shortage of rural Kansans in the productive age groups.

Finally, a rapidly-expanding agri-industry is contributing to the disappearance of family farms and thus, to some extent, to additional outmigration. These conditions, taken together, delineated the context in which we would work. With a number of communities having requested assistance in starting an educational program, the project began in the summer of 1975.

The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), Department of Health, Education and Welfare, provided funds to create free university-community education projects in 12 locations over a two year period. ACTION supplied Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) to serve as local coordinators in each community. During the months of August and September local advisory boards were established and community needs assessments were conducted to determine the direction of the individual programs. The first brochures of courses were distributed in mid-October.

The Advisory Boards

A common problem with federally-supported projects, one to which rural people are especially sensitive, is that they often involve the arrival of outside "experts" whose task is then to explain how to do things. Although in many cases this is exactly what needs to be done, it is important to develop procedures that result in gaining community support rather than hostility or antagonism.

The use of an advisory board is one such procedure. To be effective, in terms of the objectives of this project, it was crucial that each board be as representative as possible of all segments of the community. Through informal conversations, beginning with personal contacts from the earlier forums, and expanding from there, a wide range of people were met during the first few weeks and then assembled into what might be called model boards.

In one community, for instance, the board consisted of the newspaper editor, superintendent of schools, two attorneys (one new, one well-established), a farmer, a retired person, three homemakers, a teacher, a minister, a doctor and two social workers. The most obvious omission is an unemployed or underemployed poor person. Our experience has suggested, however, that while representation might be very desirable, people in such a situation—with rare exceptions—function very poorly in a public decision making capacity. Also, in this particular instance at least, the interests of the poor were represented by the minister and the social workers. Similar board compositions were developed in the other communities, and the role of the board was defined to include advising, resource development, publicity and overall support of the project.

The Needs Assessment and the Response

The project operated with a rather unconventional needs assessment. It was established early that these programs would be 100 per cent locally-oriented. Instead of the professional staff at the University for Man designing programs for the communities, they worked hand in hand with community members to design programs based on each community's unique needs and resources. Each program has its own name, something other than UFM. The local needs assessment was unique in that, among other things, it was quick.

In developing courses for the first fall term, as much community input as possible was sought. To find out what people wanted to learn or teach, a very simple flyer was designed and mailed to all clubs and organizations, teachers and a list of some 400 people in each area. The form was also published in each local newspaper. Each community's responses provided the basis for its first series of courses. The mid-October target dates were met with brochures featuring 15-20 courses per community, almost all of which were led by local people representing many different walks of life. These courses were a microcosm of what is offered through UFM in Manhattan, as they covered a broad range of pursuits from scholastics to crafts and sports to foods. The brochures were distributed widely and each community then held registration. The average enrollment in each of the six small rural communities was 300 participants.

The VISTA's joined the project late in the fall, underwent initial training and spent some time adjusting to their new surroundings. They then commenced work on the development of spring courses and programs. By the end of January 1976, course brochures listing from 25 to 50 events per community had been published and distributed. The response to the spring program increased significantly in every community. During the spring, the VISTA's became actively involved in a wide variety of other local service projects. Another series of brochures was produced in the summer and the fall. In August 1976, work began in a second set of six communities. This second year is proceeding very smoothly, partly because of some additional resources involved in the project. The Kansas Center for Community Education Development at Kansas State University has been actively participating the entire year, sharing its resources, assisting with VISTA training, and strategizing for future developments of this kind. A documentary film about the project has been released also.

A wealth of survey data was collected the first year. Though many more women participated than men, all ages and levels of formal education were represented. Most participants indicated an interest in furthering their educations, but few noted a concern with college credits. More people indicated that they would participate in this particular program rather than other postsecondary educational options. This tends to support the view that this educational model is well suited to rural educational needs.

Conclusion

The major problems addressed in this project were: (1) to set up viable programs of free university-community education following the UFM model and (2) to establish frameworks at the local level for their continuation. Both of these challenges have been successfully addressed.

Many people had argued that such developments would never occur in rural Kansas, thus the major problem that remains is to document this success and to assist other communities in developing similar programs.

As noted earlier, America is a nation with a large number of voluntary associations. The proliferation of such groups has generated a greater demand for coordinating activities so that a determination of what the needs are can be made. Coordination can also guard against fruitless duplication of activities. Unfortunately, this need for coordination often goes unfulfilled. Moreover, an enormous number of contemporary voluntary associations fail to transcend social divisions according to age, sex and socio-economic status. These two conditions taken together have brought into focus the need for new innovations in education, particularly in rural areas.

A free university-community education "association" can accomplish objectives which traditional voluntary associations are unable to do. For example, in rural America today there is considerable concern about the plight of the small farmer. In one of the target counties, there are a large number of farm organizations and each has offered some issues forums dealing with this matter. As might be expected, the response has generally been limited to supporters of the particular group sponsoring the program. Late in 1975, however, a day-long seminar on the plight of the small farmer was offered through the community education project and every farm organization in the county was invited to be a co-sponsor. Two hundred and thirty farmers registered and spent the day in earnest discussion. Since then, several spin-off groups have developed and a major series of educational seminars were conducted in conjunction with local, regional and national resource people. Had any one of the existing farm organizations attempted such a project on their own, the results, by their own admission, would not have been nearly as effective.

There are at least two differences between the UFM educational model and more traditional groups. The first difference is flexibility. In the UFM model as applied to rural areas, associations are formed on the basis of present day needs and interests. Participants are not shackled by an organizational structure which is unable to adapt to contemporary needs, interests, problems and issues. The model is also flexible in terms of the time span and frequency of association meetings. Classes and other events can last a length of time ranging from one meeting to one meeting every week for six months. Meetings can be continued as long as they are needed by the participants. They can meet for an hour per meeting or be organized as day-long workshops. Secondly, they transcend the traditional social divisions noted earlier concerning participation in voluntary associations, e.g. age, race, sex, socio-economic status and the farm/town schism. These are advantages over voluntary groups which devote more attention to structure than content, meet within certain preconceived time frames whether or not they are appropriate to the business at hand, and focus their program only on certain segments of the community. Free university-community education in dealing with these problems provides a superb forum through which the individual can develop means for significant learning, a sense of community social action, and the potential for social change with a minimum of bureaucracy and other encumbering annoyances which often beset voluntary associations.

These rural educational programs in Kansas promote a particular educational model. There are, of course, other models which, under particular conditions, will also meet with success. However, the educational programs of UFM emphasize several concepts which other educators have not focused on. In the UFM approach, education is viewed as being intimately related to other processes of community development. Second, this particular model does not require any bricks and mortar investments. It makes use of existing facilities and focuses on program development rather than facility development. And finally, it is cost-effective. UFM mobilizes volunteers in order to provide quality education at a minimal cost. That there is no cost to participants has been one of the most exciting topics of discussion in the rural communities.

The project has raised other questions as well; it has stimulated controversy and critical analysis. In that spirit, UFM offers this two-year project as an effective model for rural educational development. Hopefully some ideas have been shared which will not only further UFM's educational efforts, but also assist in strengthening other educational programs. If this can happen, more and more communities will move into the 1980's with an educational program they can call their own.

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