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Building Social Capital and Community Capacity with Signature Projects: A Case Study of Two Diverse Delta Communities

Abstract

This article describes action strategies that were planned and implemented by diverse groups of citizens in community development signature projects. Ten values and operating principles to guide successful signature projects are presented. Criteria are presented that Cooperative Extension, regional universities, and community partners can use to plan, fund, implement, and evaluate signature projects that build social capital and community capacity. Signature projects and social capital are defined. The article describes how signature projects worked in small, diverse, rural communities in the Mississippi Delta. The role of signature projects in building social, human capital, and enhancing community capacity is explained.

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Purpose

This article presents a case study of community development signature projects and how they built social capital and community capacity in two small and racially diverse rural Mississippi Delta communities. After defining signature projects, diversity, and social capital, roles and responsibilities of participants in signature projects are presented along with 10 values and operating principles that create norms of social reciprocity in communities that seemed to have lost hope. Criteria are listed for planning, funding, implementing, and evaluating sustainable signature projects that build social capital and community capacity. Next, methods and types of data collected are described. After describing signature projects in two diverse rural communities, we discuss the outcomes in relation to other research on building social capital, human capital, and community capacity.

Defining Signature Projects, Diversity, and Social Capital

Defining Signature Projects

Signature projects are action projects that begin the process of redefining community in places that seem to have lost hope. Signature projects engage local citizens in collective actions to create changes desired in their community. By participating in community development projects that are driven by locally established goals, as opposed to those imposed by an outside sponsor, diverse groups of residents from all walks of life assume the responsibility for activities that enhance their involvement in and identification with their community. Self help (Littrell & Hobbs, 1989), technical assistance (Fear, Gamm, & Fisher, 1989), social capital (Putnam, 1993; Meikle-Yaw, 2006) and process assistance (Robinson, 2002) are important components of signature projects.

Defining Diversity

We worked with diverse groups of blacks and whites, men and women, youth and the elderly, professionals, laborers, and the unemployed, and poor and wealthy residents--local people from all walks of life--became engaged in planning and had full responsibility for the community improvement projects in their communities. As Chavez suggests, we sought to "include the efforts and 'voices' of all citizens in our understanding of community and development initiatives" (2005, p.333).

Defining Social Capital

We define social capital as social resources that are ingrained in network connections, reciprocity norms, and social trusts that facilitate a variety of participative transactions that allow individuals, groups, and the community at large to cooperate and coordinate activities in achieving mutual goals for mutual benefits. Other definitions of social capital can be found in the work of Putnam (1993, 2000) and Flora, Sharp, and Newlon (1997).

Research Propositions

We argue that new relationships established among diverse participants in signature projects would act as mechanisms to shape individuals' collective ability to redefine community. As Wilkinson argued, we posit that interaction in projects for the collective welfare of the community would lead to common interests, mutual identity, and a commitment in the local territory (Wilkinson, 1991), which would foster the sustainability of signature projects. Finally, we propose that a sense of civic responsibility would emerge and encourage diverse citizens to act collectively for the common good.

Roles and Responsibilities in Signature Projects

Orientation Sessions

Formal notices about the possibility of funding for community improvement projects were mailed to public and private sector organizations throughout a multi-county area. Posters were placed in Post Offices, courthouses, and in faith-based organizations. Public service announcements were made on radio and television. Notification letters and flyers invited all residents to an orientation session in their community to learn how local organizations could obtain funding for projects to improve their community. These 2-hour sessions were planned carefully and not hurried.

In 1994, more than 750 Deltans attended 26 public orientation sessions to help community residents and organization obtain funding for improvement projects. The meetings were designed specifically to help community residents, organizations, or groups obtain funding for a community improvement project of their choice. All program policies were explained, such as of types of acceptable in-kind matches and expenditures. Outreach professionals, or "Community Educators," were available to provide follow-up technical assistance to potential collaborators. We distributed and explained the guidelines for preparing a community improvement project proposal (see the following section). Information on the time, date, and place for submitting written proposals were announced. Our university appointed a committee of regional leaders to review proposals and select two communities where signature projects were implemented.

Plans for Signature Projects

Community organizations developed written plans for signature projects that:

1. Described a community action that emerged from the local needs assessment.
2. Listed a series of action strategies for addressing the need(s).
3. Listed intended project outcomes.
4. Showed evidence of collaboration with two or more local organizations.
5. Cited individuals and organizations primarily responsible for the project.
6. Included a plan for on-going evaluation based on feedback from program participants.
7. Described the ability of the grantee to receive and manage grant funds.

8. Had a budget that itemized how grant funds would be spent and listed commitments of cash and in-kind match.
9. Included formal letters of commitment from local organizations that agreed to provide cash match, human resources, in-kind match, and other support.
10. Described a plan for sustaining the project.

Racial Composition of the Two Communities

One of the communities had a total population of 3,437, with 83.2% black, 16.1% white, and .7% other (U. S. Census, 2000). The economy of this community was dominated by farming and agribusiness. The other community had 2,312 residents, with 92.1% black, 7.3% white, and .6% other (U. S. Census, 2000). The smaller town was primarily a bedroom community to the nearby county seat. The reader should note that this was the first time that residents of diverse communities where blacks comprised the majority of the population had worked with whites as socially engaged citizens to plan, implement, and help evaluate community development projects in the Mississippi Delta. Also, it should be noted that the Delta has always been a region characterized by persistent and pervasive poverty and a history of segregation and racism.

Values and Principles That Build Social Capital and Support Signature Projects

Ten values and operational principles for community development projects were distributed and explained to participants in the orientation sessions. They were informed that they would never be told what to do--that decision was theirs. In essence, the 10 items were used to encourage the establishment of norms of social reciprocity that under gird the work and relationships of diverse groups citizens from who had never worked together to improve their community. All citizens were asked to endorse the 10 values and principles below as guidelines to follow.

1. Community and economic development is everybody's business.
2. Planning for community development programs must be implemented with and by citizens from all walks of life in the community, not to and for them.
3. The driving force for developing and sustaining long-term programs in community and economic development, in building social capital and in creating cultural change can come from informed citizens and organizational leaders in communities. While using the self-help approach and working together, they will develop their capacity by learning from each other. If technical or process assistance is needed from experts outside of the community, they may ask for and receive it.
4. Leadership, community, and economic development are processes and tasks that are never finished.
5. Citizens will support projects and programs that they help create.
6. A framework for public and private sector teamwork will bring innovation, creativity, and synergism to signature projects in any community.
7. Human resource skills and leadership skills of citizens from all walks of life in a community can be developed, and innovation and creativity can be stimulated among all segments of the population. Everyone is in some capacity my superior.
8. The primary wealth of any community is its people. Human resource development programs must have priority as communities develop and implement projects.
9. There is no quick or easy fix for most community development challenges! It will not be easy for communities to achieve goals and fulfill their mission. Progress is achieved step-by-step and project by project, and with the commitment to a long-term effort.

10. Community participants and Extension Professionals can learn together from their successes and failures. By celebrating success together, and not losing hope when there is failure, our community will remain steadfast as we pursue a shared vision for community and economic development.

Methods

Participatory Planning and Evaluation Research

A participatory planning and evaluation research model developed by one of the authors supported outreach and evaluation strategies. The outreach effort was funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation from 1994 - 2003. The summative evaluation research was funded by the USDA's National Research Competitive Grants Initiative during 2002-2004. It assessed program outcomes and capacity building in the two communities.

Methods of Data Collection

To assure objectivity, on-going evaluation, and summative evaluation research strategies were adopted. On-going evaluation occurred throughout the program as data were collected by teams of outside consultants through face-to-face interviews with community participants. This assured that data were collected on the operational principles and values, described above. Also, through this process, the project leader obtained objective input about the desires for additional projects.

Summative Evaluation and Data Analysis

This article results from summative evaluation. Qualitative methods of analysis were for this research. Data were collected during 2003 and 2004 through focus group discussions with 82 persons in the two communities who had participated in signature projects. Also, the 82 respondents completed a structured interview schedule that assessed their behaviors and beliefs about the sustainability of their local community development organization. Finally, data from a social and economic impact assessment by an external consultant are used to help assess sustainability.

Grant Size and Matching Funds

The key component for successful signature projects was that local residents, not outsiders, decided what they would do to improve their community. Grants provided for the Delta's signature projects were \$15,000 per year, and required some cash match. A 1:1 match was preferred. Local support included time commitments of organizational staff and volunteer leaders, the commitment of organizational resources such as space, equipment and communications and any legitimate expense, such as equipment, meeting space, or essential volunteer labor. The only formal requirements by the university were that grantees must: (1) provide cash and in-kind match that equaled or exceeded the \$15,000 grant per year; and, (2) submit a quarterly financial report that documented the expenditure of project funds (this regulation was imposed by the State of Mississippi and it caused no problems).

Outcomes from Signature Projects

The Center for Community and Economic Development at Delta State University appointed two AmeriCorps volunteers, who were community residents, to serve as Community Educators. They received special training in leadership, communications, and team building. This helped them provide technical and process assistance in project development and implementation. They worked with local citizens to create and implement community improvement projects. Local citizens had full responsibility for overseeing the work of the Community Educator. Both communities decided to have two-day workshops to assess local resources and needs and to establish priorities for projects. Workshop facilitators were university staff.

In Farmington, the Community Educator worked from 1996-2000 with Farmington Community and Economic Development Foundation (FCEDF), the new non-profit organization that replaced the Chamber of Commerce. (Farmington and Bayou Town and the names of sponsoring organizations are pseudonyms.) FCEDF created and posted four large signs at each major entrance to the town. A contest was held among high school students, who nominated their suggestions for the town's motto. Today the winning motto appears on four signs that state "Farmington, a town preparing for tomorrow, today!" Next, FCEDF enlisted the involvement of the community in a simple but important project that touched the lives of every Farmington resident--mosquito control!

Farmington built on early successes and its pool of social capital to create community development projects that were more complex. They revitalized shopping in downtown, held an annual blues festival, obtained funding for "youth build project," and built a state-of-the-art public playground. Local funding for the playground was \$120,000. Approximately 160 black and white residents worked on weekends to build the playground, and it was selected as the top "Self Help Project in the State of Mississippi in 2005" by the Governor. One example of how signature projects developed human capital is the fact that after his two years of service in AmeriCorps ended, the Community Educator was hired as FCEDF Executive Director.

Bayou Town, a new nonprofit organization was created. Citizens Reinvesting In Bayou Town (CRIBT) began with two signature projects in 1996. First, they cleaned and landscaped the grounds surrounding Porter's Bayou, which runs through downtown. They demolished decaying buildings, built benches, and planted shrubs. During the Christmas season, they invited individuals and organizations to place floats on the bayou. Each year a community-wide lighting ceremony is held on the last Sunday evening of November. Next, a memorial park was built in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The successes of CRIBT with these two signature projects generated social capital and stimulated mobilization for numerous other community development initiatives. For example, they upgraded the high school's football stadium, built playgrounds at elementary schools, and established linkages with external organizations to improve streets and reduce problems with water drainage. In 1998 the Bayou Town Educational and Cultural Center was constructed to house the town's library and provide facilities for community events. In 2003 and 2004, CRIBT created a walking trail and a new park in the heart of the town.

Discussion

Signature Projects and Social Capital

Our signature projects included community education, civic responsibility, and participation in community improvement activities. When a signature project ended, participants reflected on the completed project and knew, "We did this!" (See Robinson, Silvis, & Moore, 2002). Our first proposition was supported. As diverse groups of community leaders achieved progress, they indicated that they had gained confidence that change was possible. Enhancing social capital and civic participation gave communities the momentum to move forward. In brief, local residents attributed the success of all of these projects to the social capital that was built through the diverse collaboration that occurred because of their participation in their local signature projects.

Building Human Capital

Developing human capital became an important aspect of program sustainability. Participation in signature project was often the first professional experience for local residents especially minorities (Moore, 2004). This was the primary reason that signature projects gave attention to leadership development for local volunteers. A key outcome was helping to prepare volunteers for a life of local community service and civic participation after the signature project ended.

Signature Projects and Community Capacity

Successes in signature projects created an "upward spiraling effect" for social capital that builds even more social resources within communities (Flora et al., 1997). Also, a "bridging social capital effect" is seen as local organizations establish linkages outside the community (Putnam, 2000). Propositions two and three were supported.

Local responsibility is the core element of signature projects that increased partnerships and social relations that function as channels of communication within and between local stakeholder groups. As diverse groups of citizens participated in signature projects that they have planned, they developed leadership skills and came together to make inclusive decisions. They were working together for mutual causes, not competing for limited resources. In this context, social capital exemplified citizens' capability to mobilize a wide range of social resources that aided in the functioning of community life.

Building community capacity for change blended social and political power, through which interacting individuals and groups authenticated their community attachment. Community capacity was enhanced by positive social interactions. In a participatory community, the question is how the setting affects social behavior. Developing community capacity can never be separated from the processes of social interaction that defines it within a context (Wilkinson, 1991). The context and the action "affect" one another. For example, context influenced social interaction among residents in diverse communities. Previously, much of the social and political context in the communities described in this paper had been competition and conflict.

We found that blacks, who formally had little economic power but most of the political power, and the whites, who were a small minority and had most of the economic power, worked together for the collective good of their home town in both communities. This was contrary to the findings of Schaft and Greenwood (2003), who argued that preexisting power structures and organizational dilemma limit participation in community projects. For example, when diverse groups of residents in one of our communities decided to work together, the Chamber of Commerce, which had historically been an exclusive white organization, disbanded. Funds that the Chamber had on hand (more than \$3,000) were transferred to the new and diverse community development organization.

Signature Projects Helped Create the Sustainability of Community Development Organizations

After 8 years, an independent impact assessment indicated that the two rural communities had completed more than 75 improvement projects and leveraged more than \$55.00 of external and internal support for each seed grant dollar provided by Delta State University (Campbell, 2003). Today these communities have strong community development organizations in place that remain active in community development. Local residents attribute the success of their organizations to the internal and external networks established through their signature projects.

Conclusions

Working together is the first step toward building community. When diverse groups of citizens completed signature project tasks, their actions redefined the local community and improved associational networks. Civic participation provided opportunities for learning, skill building, creating new leaders, and nurturing a culture of participatory development. The substance for building community capacity, social capital, and civic participation will be augmented when diverse people participate and interact in a wholesome and winsome manner with each another in various roles to accomplish the goals they had set for their community. By working as peers to accomplish a goal or task, people learn new things about each other and themselves and discover that they can do things together that they didn't previously recognize.

Furthermore, the bylaws of lead organizations in both communities, which were written locally, stated that each board of directors would be comprised of seven individuals who served staggered 3-year terms. Also, the bylaws specified that chairs rotate annually from black to white and that an elected public official could not be an officer of the board of directors. This policy was developed to keep members of the board from using the organization for political gain.

Our experience was contrary to the research of Chavez (2005), who studied a small rural California community which a large population of recent migrants from Mexico. He found that whites who had been long-term residents preferred the community of the past and thought that the influx of Mexicans had caused them to lose the essence of their community. Conversely, Mexican "immigrants tended to create a community of need aimed at providing social, emotional, and political support absent from the mainstream society" (Chavez, 2005, p.332.) Perhaps the difference in our case was that most blacks and whites were long-term residents and that for the first time they were working together to define the community from a more inclusive perspective.

New Social Networks Yielded Stronger Communities

In essence, prolific civic participation and strong associational life were the engines behind effective signature projects. Putnam (2000) centers his argument on how social networks foster trust and civic participation. He notes, "networks of civic participation that cut across social cleavages nourish wider cooperation" (Putnam 1993a:175). Thus, the two communities with abundant stock of social capital were more able to respond to concerns of citizens and effectively work in partnerships, groups, and institutions to achieve common goals, especially in times of crises.

In these communities, successful signature projects became the primary indicators of citizens' collective capability to purposefully participate in, exert influence, learn responsibility, and affect the outcome of various socio-economic activities. Participants stated that a new sense of social connectedness was stimulating diverse and public-spirited citizens to cooperate and coordinate civic activities with confidence that things would improve. When diverse groups of citizens became involved in working out mutually acceptable solutions through signature projects that affect their community, they reported that new interpersonal ties and trust (social capital) were developed. They grew into democratically responsible citizens and reaffirmed community strength (Shepherd & Bowler, 1997).

Extension's Role

Because of its legacy and passion for a culture of service, Cooperative Extension and its collaborators can anticipate significant and meaningful changes in organizations that form diverse partnerships to serve communities. Thus, with the theory and practices described in this article, Extension can look to the future with hope, even in marginal areas of rural and urban America. Extension can renew and improve efforts to work diligently toward creating and empowering diverse partnerships in formal collaborative community projects.

We invite Extension leaders to renew this quest by creating and implementing more signature projects in diverse communities. This will help restore hope in marginal and diverse communities by building social capital and community capacity through "real not symbolic" citizen engagement.

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