Low Resources in a High Stakes Game: Identifying Viable Rural Community Partners

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Abstract
Extension resources are shrinking, yet community leadership needs are great, and, the consequences of neglecting them are dire. It is difficult to respond to all the requests that are made of Extension faculty and even more difficult to decide which of the communities will benefit the most from programming. This article illuminates these issues by examining contributions from related research. First, a link is forged between community capital theory and community survival indicators. Next, 111 signs are provided that identify community viability. Finally, a guide is proposed for use in Extension to help determine where to concentrate scant resources.

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Introduction

Higher education institutions are operating in an era of shrinking budgets (Acker, 2001). This fiscal austerity translates into challenges in adequately addressing institutional mission and demonstrating impacts. No place is that more of a challenge than in Cooperative Extension. Community needs can be considerable, and in some parts of the country, neglecting these needs can result in ruin. Across the nation, communities are disappearing as a result of the national trend of negative growth in rural counties (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Regardless of these shifts in population, Cooperative Extension has a statewide programming mission to serve the educational needs of all citizens at all age levels. Unfortunately, limited resources require tough choices in programming. High-priority programs that produce the greatest impacts, and from an accountability standpoint, stand up to public scrutiny, are valued (Bogue, 1998). From a community leadership perspective, it is often difficult to respond to the myriad of community requests that are made of faculty. To compound the problem, it is often even more difficult to decide which of the potential community partners will benefit the most from an infusion of leadership programming.

How can theory be used by Extension faculty to help prioritize requests for community leadership development? This article proposes to address that very question by forging a link between community capital theory (Flora & Flora, 2004) and community survival indicators (Luther & Wall, 1988).

The Theoretical Framework

Linking theory to practice is an essential part of the land-grant mission. Thus, the work on community capitals by Flora and Flora (2004) was chosen for theoretical framework for the research reported here. In their work, Flora and Flora (2004) describe the different resources available within community and how these resources translate into capital for the community. Luther and Wall (1988) identify specific, community attributes that tend to indicate the viability of a particular community. Linking these two perspectives together may help to identify where the greatest programming impacts can be achieved for the greatest number of people.

Community Capitals

According to Flora and Flora (2004), there exist both tangible and intangible resources in every community, no matter how remote or impoverished. Expanding on the literature concerning these intangible and tangible capitals, Flora and Flora (2004) carefully assembled a comprehensive list of seven capitals that may be found in a community.

Intangible capitals consist of those unseen assets that community members possess, both individually and corporately. *Human capital* consists of the knowledge, skills, and abilities of individual community members and how those individual assets can be invested into the community as a whole. *Cultural capital* includes the general values and attitudes held by a community, including the way they tend to approach life in general. *Political capital* is generally thought of as the amount of power a community has to determine the availability of resources and influence the distribution of those resources. *Social capital* is comprised of the social networks and the amount of collaboration found among community members as well as between communities. A key component of social capital is mutual trust.

Tangible capitals are the visible assets that a community possesses. *Financial capital* primarily consists of money that is used for investment into the community rather than for individual consumption. An important part of financial capital is its ability to be translated into other assets such as *built capital*. Built capital is comprised of the assets that have been constructed in and around the community. Roads, bridges, public services, and buildings are all part of a community's built capital. This provides a foundation for community development and growth. *Natural capital* includes the natural resources found in and around a community: landscape, water, flora, and fauna all are part of a community's natural capital.

Community Survival Indicators

In 1988, Luther and Wall published the results of their research into the economic trends, quality of life, kind of leadership, and future plans of 18 communities across 14 states, from Texas to North Dakota and Ohio to California. After careful analysis, patterns of characteristics emerged from their case studies of these towns (Luther & Wall, 1988). These patterns of characteristics indicated that certain community traits tend to be found in successful, vital towns, such as a willingness to invest in the future (Luther & Wall, 1988). The discovery of these patterns of characteristics led to their compilation in a list of 20 Clues to Rural Community Survival. Figure 1 lists the 20 clues, or community survival indicators, in numerical order. These indicators of community survival provide helpful signs of community viability that can be used in a subjective manner to profile a community.

Figure 1.
The 20 Clues to Rural Community Survival

1. Evidence of community pride

2. Emphasis on quality in business and community life

3. Willingness to invest in the future

4. Participatory approach to community decision-making

5. Cooperative community spirit

6. Realistic appraisal of future opportunities

7. Awareness of competitive positioning

8. Knowledge of physical environment

9. Active economic development program

10. Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders

11. Acceptance of women in leadership roles

12. Strong belief in and support for education

| 13. Problem-solving approach to providing health care |
| 14. Strong multi-generational family orientations |
| 15. Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life |
| 16. Sound and well-maintained infrastructure |
| 17. Careful use of fiscal resources |
| 18. Sophisticated use of information resources |
| 19. Willingness to seek help from the outside |
| 20. Conviction that in the long run you have to do it yourself |

Purpose and Methods

Purpose

The seven community capitals and the 20 community survival indicators provide ways of examining a community to determine its potential for survival and for growth. Community capital theory (Flora & Flora, 2004) provides broad descriptions of the various forms of capital that a community may possess. Community survival indicators (Luther & Wall, 1988) provide specific signs of community potential for viability. Integrating the community capitals and community survival indicators could provide a theory-based guide to assist Extension faculty in determining where to invest their limited resources for a maximum return. Thus, the purpose of the research reported here was to integrate the community capitals with community survival indicators to create a guide to help determine the most viable community partners.

Integration by Graduate Panel

Fifteen leadership education graduate students volunteered to participate in a group exercise to integrate community capital theory (Flora & Flora, 2004) and community survival indicators (Luther & Wall, 1988). First, the students reviewed descriptions of the community capitals (Flora & Flora, 2004) and the community survival indicators (Luther & Wall, 1988). The students were then led through a group process to categorize the 20 indicators of community survival under the seven community capitals. Because of the broad application of some of the clues, participants were permitted to categorize the clues under more than one capital. Last, through the use of brainstorming, the students identified specific examples of the community survival indicators that are common to most rural communities.

Results of Graduate Panel

Table 1 reports the results of integrating the seven community capitals and the 20 community survival indicators. Several of the indicators were listed twice, and one ("Inclusive culture where women are seen in leadership roles") was listed three times. Nineteen community survival indicators were listed under the intangible capitals, and 10 were listed under the tangible capitals. Table 2 reports the results of the brainstorming session to identify specific community examples of the community survival indicators. One hundred and eleven examples were listed for the 20 community survival indicators, or more than five examples, on average, for each indicator.

Table 1.
Integration of Community Capitals with the 20 Community Survival Indicators

Social Capital	Cultural Capital	Human Capital	Political Capital	Natural Capital	Financial Capital	Built Capital
4. Collaborative decision making	2. Quality in business and community is a way of life	6. Realistic appraisal of community strengths	7. Awareness of community's strengths compared to competitors	8. Awareness of strengths of community's environment	3. Invest in the future	2. Quality in business and community is a way of life
5. Cooperative community spirit, working toward a common goal	5. Cooperative community spirit, working toward a common goal	10. Deliberate transition of power to younger generations	9. Active, organized approach to economic development	1. Evidence of community pride	17. Thoughtful use of fiscal resources with focus on the future	6. Realistic appraisal of community strengths
9. Active, organized approach to economic development	11. Inclusive culture where women are	11. Inclusive culture where women are	11. Inclusive culture where women are seen in			8. Awareness of strengths of community's environment

	seen in leadership roles	seen in leadership roles	leadership roles			
13. Problem solving approach to providing health-care	14. Inclusive culture where all generations are included in activities	20. Proactive in making community a good place to be	18. Access information beyond that found in community			12. Believe strongly in good schools and support for education
18. Access information beyond that found in community	15. Strong presence of traditional institutions in community life					13. Problem solving approach to providing health-care
19. Seek outside help such as grants and development contracts	1. Evidence of community pride					15. Strong presence of traditional institutions in community life
						16. Maintenance and improvement of infrastructure a priority

Table 2.

Validated Community Examples of Community Survival Indicators/Viable Community Partners Guide

Abridged Community Survival Indicators	Community Examples						
1. Community pride	Local museum shows historical pride	Community festivals celebrate their heritage	Pride shown through decoration themes in community	Committee in charge community beautification	School parades	Thoughtful use of natural resources and care is given to environment	Clean streets, yards and parks
2. Emphasis on Quality in Business and Community Life	Presence of formal business organizations	A strong Chamber of Commerce maintains a city website	Classes are offered on business development and entrepreneurship	Presence of an active economic center	Presence of an active community center		
3. Invest in the future	Actively seeking new technology and resources	Local foundation for community development	Industrial park	Programs for youth development and engagement	Jobs for youth	Up-to-date educational system	Alliances with post secondary institutions
4. Participatory Approach to Community Decision Making	Focus groups and task forces are used	Presence of active civic groups	City Council meetings are open to all				
5. Cooperative Community Spirit	Presence of an active community center	Residents cooperate in community celebrations	Development of city improvement projects	Community members work concession stands at games	Strong public attendance at school games and activities	Community members volunteer for fire dept.	
6. Realistic Appraisal of Future Opportunities	Continuous and effective assessment of future jobs and growth	Strategic planning to optimize community strengths	Town has developed a mission statement which is visible in public	Continuous research in economic development			
7. Awareness of Competitive Positioning	Evidence of small town merchants	Awareness of niche markets which capitalize on strengths	Innovative entrepreneurship	Assessment of economic market and declines			

8. Knowledge of the Physical Environment	Tourism is promoted	Presence of community park	Organized town layout that attracts business	Assessment and improvement of infrastructure	Pictures of attractions and resources are used to advertise		
9. Active Economic Development Program	Paid community development professional	Presence of 'business incubator'	Planning is done with the region in mind	Active Chamber of Commerce			
10. Deliberate Transition of Power to Younger Generation of Leader	Presence of mentoring programs	Presence of youth involvement in local government	Entrepreneurship class offered in the high school	Service learning programs utilized to promote civic engagement	Youth civic groups are supported		
11. Acceptance of Women in Leadership	Women involved in local government	Women involved in law enforcement	Presence of female business owners	Presence of female elected officials	Women involved in educational administration	Women accepted as church leaders	
12. Strong Belief in and Support for Education:	Community support of good teachers	Community events held at the school	Strong attendance at parent/teacher conferences	Attendance of community at School Board meetings	Support by community for school fund raisers	Support for a property levy to help pay school costs	
13. Problem-solving Approach to Providing Health Care	Community-wide board is established to focus on health care	Certification opportunities for the community (CPR, first aid, etc)	A hospital or clinic is located in the community and has expert staff	Networking with specialists and special equipment (Cardiology equipment)	Allocating money to EMT, Ambulance	Assisted living facility for elderly	
14. Strong Multigenerational Family Orientation	Adopt-a-Grandparent	Community celebrations passing on traditions	Intergenerational dialogues at the schools	Youth volunteers at Nursing homes, etc	Volunteer grandparents in schools	Family fun nights-with teams	Strong 4-H programs
15. Strong Presence of Institutions that are Integral to Community Life	Active community center	Support of school, involvement in local religious institution	Historical sites are celebrated and promoted	Businesses and entrepreneurship are promoted	Well-attended community dinners and social meetings		
16. Sound and Well-maintained infrastructure	Streets are improved regularly	Community budget allocates money to re-construction and town maintenance	Sidewalks and handicap accessible curbs	Continual upkeep of vacant buildings	Community wide clean-up and landscaping committees	Buildings are regularly repaired and kept up-to-date	
17. Careful Use of Fiscal Resources	Capable council treasurer	Budget planning sessions	Community fund is supported by residents	Public attendance at meetings on the budget	Strategic plans-five years	Balanced budget	
18. Sophisticated use of Information Resources	Internet service in households and schools	New computers in the schools	Community training on resource gathering and the internet	Networking with outside communities			
19. Willingness to Seek Help from the Outside	Partnership with a university	Networking with outside health services	Exchange program with another state	4-H international exchange	International Sister Cities Program		
20. Conviction that in the long run you have to do it yourself	Thriving grassroots networks	Presence of multigenerational businesses	Applications for grants are actively sought	Inclusive leadership style is adopted by community leaders			

Validation by Expert Panel

The results of the graduate panel were presented at the 2005 Conference of the Association of Leadership Educators (ALE). Seventeen participants were presented with the results of the panel of graduate students. These participants were asked to review the results and make any additions or changes they deemed necessary. The results were collected and reviewed. One addition was made ("Community members volunteer for fire department."), but no other changes or additions were made (see Table 3). These results were then compiled and sent back to the participants for validation. Seven participants responded affirmatively. The other participants did not respond.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It appears that the community survival indicators are highly concentrated in the intangible community capitals, including social, cultural, human, and political capital. This may be good news to Extension faculty working in communities, as these intangible capitals rely so much on the human component of a community and can be maximized with cooperation of community residents. In the development of strong, viable communities, it can be easy to focus solely on the tangible capitals. Our research indicates that it is the intangibles that matter most. It is important to issue a caveat, however, about minimizing the importance of tangible capitals for community viability. Certainly, future research is needed to determine the relative importance of one category (intangible, tangible) to the other in predicting community survival.

We believe that the integration of community capitals with community survival indicators has resulted in a concrete, less subjective guide that can assist those who are trying to make rural community partner decisions. The decision to choose one community over another is a difficult one at best, and any help in facilitating this process is welcome. The guide provides some specific examples of how the indicators of rural community survival might look to an external evaluator.

When attempting to determine where scant resources should be invested, Extension faculty may wish to consult the guide and see what kinds of indicators for survival are in evidence in the communities that are seeking assistance. In addition, we believe there is potential for sharing the guide with community leaders as a means of auditing their community's health and potential. This could help communities to take their own inventory and begin to maximize their potential for viability.

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