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Overview of innovative community change programs

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This Special Issue of the *Journal* is designed to help community development practitioners and scholars in the important roles they play – both directly and indirectly – to foster community betterment. The body of work articulated in this volume builds on a long history of important community development programs and efforts.

Keywords: rural community development; community organizing; grassroots development; planning

Introduction

Communities and neighborhoods, large and small alike, not only have many opportunities but also face challenges and obstacles. How to take advantage of the opportunities and also minimize risks and challenges is paramount to those who live in these neighborhoods and communities. It is the responsibility of community development scholars and practitioners to help inform and support efforts that are most likely to help communities seize opportunities and avoid or minimize the downside. This Special Issue of the *Journal* is designed to help community development practitioners and scholars in the important roles they play – both directly and indirectly – to foster community betterment.

The body of work articulated in this volume builds on a long history of important community development programs and efforts. For example, the economic difficulties in rural areas in the 1980s triggered a round of strategic planning programs designed to evaluate possible development alternatives and plot a course for the future of many small towns. One such initiative was the *Take Charge* program launched in 1990 by the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (Take Charge) (Ayers et al. 1990). *Take Charge* was adopted and implemented by Cooperative Extension units across the US. The three basic questions raised were: (1) Where have we been? (2) Where do we want to be? (3) How will we get there? An action plan was created during the process with follow-up activities provided by the partners. In addition to providing a solid and well-founded approach to community visioning exercises, the *Take Charge* manual provided materials that can easily be used in working with diverse groups.

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The next generation of *Take Charge* was launched in 2001 and was called *Vision to Action* (Green & Borich, 2001). The revisions placed more focus on assets and talents in the community and how they can be mobilized to address high priority problems or issues. The three basic questions of *Vision to Action* are: (1) What do we want to preserve? (2) What do we want to change? (3) What do we want to create? This revised approach also placed greater emphasis on monitoring results and outcomes and the importance of accountability. Such an emphasis is consistent with many initiatives of local and state agencies, the Federal government, foundations and other groups interested in obtaining better estimates of outcomes from investments in local projects.

Many projects and related programmatic efforts spun off from the two generations of *Take Charge*, with a common thread of bringing about positive changes in the communities (Walzer and Hamm, 2012). These diverse approaches are important because they are customized to meet the unique needs of each community. Common among the multitude of programmatic efforts, however, is to build the capacity of community leaders and residents to create, implement and evaluate strategies and tactics that will ultimately raise the quality of life, expand employment opportunities, and/or improve other desired characteristics sought by communities.

Many of the programs and initiatives featured in this volume can trace their roots back to *Take Charge* and/or *Vision to Action*. Such programs and initiatives are needed more than ever due to the current prolonged recession with serious unemployment, outmigration, and related social and political issues.

Another purpose of this Special Issue is to help bring together some of the important but scattered literature about community change, how it can be launched, processes involved, and the outcomes. Such a compilation makes it easier for academics and practitioners to reflect on their own work and improve its effectiveness by considering important factors that have led to the success, and limitations, of the work of others.

Principles of effective practice

In 2010, a team of researchers and practitioners from several Midwestern universities and other organizations[1] received funding from the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development to convene academics and practitioners from long-standing and successful community change programs, mainly from the Midwest, to identify factors that contribute to successful community changes. Participants were selected based on the outcomes that had been obtained from the innovative approaches used in their community change programs, the length of time the programs had been active, and the diversity of populations engaged in the programs. The leaders of these programs met on multiple occasions and, based on their experiences with these and other programs, identified four factors common to successes. These factors are briefly described below and were among the criteria used in selecting the seven articles included in this volume.

Prepare communities for intervention efforts

A consensus exists among program leaders regarding a strong relationship between successful results and time spent preparing participants, regardless of whether it is a far-reaching program or targeted to a specific population or group within the community. Lack of advance preparation or "readiness" in the community may be a

significant reason why intervention programs, in some instances, have not obtained desired results.

Three "readiness" factors were identified. First, when the goal is community-wide change, then the entire community must be informed. This is not simply a matter of a widespread awareness of the program and desired outcomes but a willingness to be open to the need for change as well. Part of this participatory education process also involves broad-based involvement, especially by groups and segments of the community population that have not held leadership positions or even participated in similar endeavors. In some instances, programs and initiatives specifically targeted to marginalized groups may be needed before it is possible to realize the full potential of their assets in the broader community change dynamic. Of special importance is encouraging, and then supporting, first time leaders. These leaders face risks in assuming leadership roles; helping them succeed can have lasting effects for the community.

Second, a general awareness and superficial participation in the intervention process is not sufficient; deep and purposeful buy-in is crucial. Because outcomes are likely to take several years to accomplish, local ownership drives successful results. If participants and other residents are not fully committed to the program, they may become distracted by the next of several projects that are launched in the community. All of these factors must be actively considered before a new program or initiative is fully launched.

Third, identifying and strengthening local networks in the community is often key to long-term success and community change. Networks are vital to the successful implementation of the vision, goals, and projects that the intervention process is likely to generate. In many, or even most instances, the networks exist but must be brought to light and activated. These networks can involve business relationships, social groups, and other interactions that can be made even more active and powerful as part of the intervention process. Therefore, it is necessary to identify relevant existing networks in advance and then use their power as part of the intervention process. Often, this will simultaneously lead to the strengthening or broadening of existing networks or in some cases the creation of new networks.

High quality programs

Community development programs and initiatives must be of high quality and address the priority needs, as defined by the community, to hold the attention of participants. It may be tempting to design one program that, with only minor adjustments in delivery, is expected to work in a completely different context or community size. Effective programs and their implementation must recognize the unique local opportunities and capitalize on them to achieve desired outcomes. At least four characteristics of high quality and effective programs were identified by the scholars and practitioners assembled as part of the North Central Regional Development supported project.

First, participants must understand the differences between *program, process*, and *product*. The *program* has a specific purpose and approach intended to accomplish certain outcomes. The program often involves an external partner that is brought into the community in accordance with a prescribed set of events or formats. As noted earlier, it is critical that such a program be sufficiently flexible, adjusting to specific needs in the community.

It is the *process* that ultimately brings about changes within the community and leads to long-term desired outcomes. As it turns out, the process of change can occur through a variety of programs or approaches depending on which is most effective in working with community residents. The process can be difficult to monitor and measure on a regular basis because it depends heavily on the extent and quality of participation by community leaders and residents.

The program typically yields a final *product(s)* which may include a report, community meetings, action plan or other visible measures of outputs that hopefully will lead to a set of desired outcomes in the future. Participants may be tempted to think that the program is over when the product has been delivered. Actually, the product often does no more than sets the stage for subsequent actions – and ongoing *processes* – that will lead to successful outcomes.

Second, it is important that successful outcomes and changes are documented to monitor the need for adjustments in the program, reasons for success and/or to build credibility for the change efforts.

Third, successful programs that accomplish desired results are likely to have solid theoretical underpinnings and incorporate current thinking from the scholarly and professional literature. This approach is important not only to provide the best quality programming but also to gain and/or maintain credibility for the programs.

Finally, when it is possible to link programs or initiatives to major events in the community, it is often easier to build awareness, gain needed support and credibility, and ultimately community ownership. The *Break Through* program pioneered in Arkansas is an excellent example of how community initiatives can be bolstered by helping participants to "think outside the box" and launch challenging new approaches that stretch the current paradigms and set new horizons (Peterson, Levy, & Jones 2012). Programs that set new directions capture the community's attention and can create a major venue around which the community can organize. Several programs featured in this Special Issue have used this type of an approach or strategy.

Effective program implementation

To a large extent this aspect is a dimension of "high quality programs" but justifies additional attention with flexibility and leadership development as key components. As was noted earlier, programs and initiatives must be flexible enough to adjust to local issues that arise, as well as adhere to the program's theoretical underpinnings and mission to maintain credibility. In other words, issues and corrective action must be addressed during programmatic implementation but without violating the basic foundation or parameters of the program or initiative. Otherwise, the entire effort or program can become diverted into a series of short-term issues and distractions.

Building community capacity by encouraging and rewarding risk-takers when they step forward is very important. Leadership development is part of the process and is an important component of the community change and capacity building process. Building the skills of relatively inexperienced local leaders often involves additional programming efforts. In such cases this must be an integral part of the process even when the results or outcomes are not immediately apparent.

A related component of effective programming is to make sure that participants can take actions immediately without feeling a need to "ask permission". This sense of empowerment and accomplishing results require an attitude and approach

permitting participants to act confidently. Involving participants in setting goals and expected outcomes from the program can help build buy-in and a greater sense of responsibility for obtaining results. Establishing networks and mobilizing local assets early in the program encourages participants to take action.

Finally, making the community change process an enjoyable and meaningful experience for participants is often essential to success. The approaches used differ across communities and by specific programs. What is common is the need to generate enthusiasm for the program or initiative and pursuit of the outcomes identified. This enthusiasm can be contagious throughout the community, build capacity, and increase the likelihood of achieving the stated goals for change.

Follow-through activities

The fourth major component of successful community change programs is, in many ways, the most important and perhaps the most often overlooked. Community change is a process that residents must pursue and it does not stop with submission of a report or completion of an event. Instead, action is required.

The extent, to which the program or initiative focuses on an action agenda rather than constructing a planning document, makes a substantial difference in terms of achieving and sustaining long-term desirable outcomes. If participants can organize around a set of actions, develop networks that support the effort, and then include a timeline with metrics for completion, they maximize their chances for success and sustainability. The shift in focus on actions and networks is highlighted in the *Strategic Doing* approach advanced by Morrison (2012). In this case, Strategic Action Packs increase the discipline in follow-through efforts in the community by adding structure to the implementation process.

One strategy is to "pick the low hanging fruit" first in order to show what can be accomplished in the program. As participants gain more confidence in what they can do, they will be encouraged to implement even more sophisticated strategies and projects. Extending the confidence to other community leaders and participants is an important outcome of the change process.

A related strategy is to focus on future opportunities for the community instead of working to correct past problems. While past events may limit future options, change programs are more likely to succeed when they build on community assets or strengths rather than only on finding remedies for perceived or real problems in the community.

The diversity in age and socioeconomic status of community residents means that multiple communication approaches must be used throughout the process, including in the initial stage of follow-through activities. For example, younger residents are more likely to rely on social networking techniques while older residents may obtain more information from traditional news media sources. Building networks using different, but complimentary, approaches is an important element in maintaining the momentum of community change.

Another element of effective follow-through is to celebrate and publicize successes. Doing so encourages participants to stretch even more, helps community residents understand what has occurred, likely brings additional participants to the table and builds credibility for the efforts underway. As noted previously, communicating these successes throughout the community will involve a variety of tools and media to reach all population segments.

Maintaining a persistent approach to follow-up is absolutely essential to successful community change processes. Effective follow-through requires strong networks of interested participants committed to positive outcomes from the change process. Some programs include community coaches who work with participants and local groups to keep them on track and help explore new opportunities. Participants must receive regular encouragement and feel that they have succeeded in the community-wide effort. Having broad community-wide goals that residents can embrace facilitates building a support base to maintain a persistent follow-up. One option or response to the notion of ''persistence'' is to be more explicit and deliberate about the importance of sustainability and resiliency. An active support base recognizing that "change is inevitable but progress is optional'' is what will bring successful community change on a recurring basis.

Overview of chapters

The programs, initiatives and projects described in subsequent articles, in one way or another, have succeeded in accomplishing community change objectives using a variety of innovative approaches. They also match up well with the four factors or principles of effective practice and programming described in the previous section.

While several articles focus, in one way or another on building leadership capacity, they illustrate the diverse approaches that can be used in meeting program objectives. A common theme running through several articles includes the importance of building leadership capacity among youth and/or other groups who are not usually part of the traditional leadership structure in communities. Because communities have different leadership programs underway, with widely differing formats and delivery systems, it is important to share resources and provide a setting in which a systems approach is available.

Several foundations in Minnesota created an *InCommons* arrangement to provide such an environment and Sandfort and Bloomberg describe the results of that approach. Although the early work is promising, long-term outcomes cannot be tracked or predicted because this initiative is in the awareness building and developmental stage. It is included in this volume partly because it is a robust example of the role that interacting ''virtually'' and the Web can play in sharing knowledge and techniques among a broad base of stakeholders. The "open-source'' nature of *InCommons* and the democratization of knowledge and information via the web-based platform mean successes in one community can be shared quickly with others in the network. Of special importance is the ability to communicate with not only members of the group but also to access available expertise anywhere.

The extensive communications and networking ability available through large scale programs such as *InCommons* also build leadership capacity by encouraging other communities to launch similar initiatives. The networking among participating communities means that leadership can be developed and promoted at a broad geographic level, such as an entire state as is the case with *InCommons*.

Apaliyah, Martin, Gasteyer, Keating, and Pigg (2012) in a study of community leadership development education programs (CLDE), report the successes of a broad range of leadership programs in preparing residents to participate more effectively in community decisions. In doing so, participants build their own human capital and then use it to build and strengthen both bonding social capital and bridging social capital. The stronger connections within the community allow CLDE

participants to assume greater leadership roles and make stronger contributions to the overall community development activities underway. Using the Community Capitals (Emery et al. 2006) framework, Apaliyah et al. conclude that community-level financial and political capital are also generated by CLDE participants.

The research design of the Apaliyah et al. (2012) study is also worthy of note. First, an experimental design is used, something that is uncommon in evaluating community development programs, including leadership programs. Specifically, the authors create ''control groups'' to use as a comparison base for what is happening with those who are participating in the various leadership development programs being studied. In addition, another aspect of the design enables the researchers to ascertain the extent to which benefits to the individual participants are also translated or manifested into greater civic engagement and community betterment.

The research builds on several other components of successful intervention programs including preparing a community for community change. The CLDE program builds a stronger cohesion within the community and enhances the leadership capacity. Communities with a higher number of CLDE programs are better positioned to understand issues facing the community and have a better grasp of what remedies might succeed. They know the assets and how the important players might come together to implement successful programs. CLDE participants are also positioned to provide continuous follow-through on the action plan created during the intervention program.

For many rural communities, the loss of youth and the potential ''brain drain'' continues to be an obstacle to long-term community growth and development. Andresen reports on attempts in northern Wisconsin and the western portion of the Upper Peninsula in Michigan (Goebic Range) to retain and attract young people to stabilize populations and build a competitive workforce. The region has a history of population declines with the ''brain drain'' so familiar to many rural areas that can ultimately lead to stagnation and higher poverty rates.

The project surveyed high school students, community college freshmen and young adults to identify the importance of area characteristics in decisions about where to live. They also asked recent in-migrants to the area about how they perceived the region *vis-à-vis* the various characteristics that may influence location decisions. Local development practitioners then focused on those factors that were viewed positively and were also important in the location decision. Efforts were then put in place to strengthen this set of assets, to promote them, and to connect high school and college students to these assets. An associated set of outcomes – short-term, mid-term, and long-term – were also delineated to provide an overall evaluation framework for this ambitious initiative.

The Wisconsin–Michigan project incorporated several components of successful community change discussed earlier. First, the program builds on community strengths using a solid data base of information about the region. Second, the program targets a population segment, specifically young adults, seen as key to regional stability in the future in terms of community capacity and leadership. Third, the program mobilizes community assets, builds on past successes, and incorporates a new approach with high expectations. Fourth, the program focuses on the future, rather than the past, in pursuing long-term sustainability for the region. Finally, the program has a cohesive and comprehensive evaluation design to provide ongoing feedback and the basis for mid-course adjustments over a 10-year planning horizon.

Many communities have programs designed to improve the skills and development of youth and some have broad-based community betterment projects and initiatives. Rarely, however, are these two programmatic domains integrated in a purposeful fashion. The work of Campbell and Erbstein (2012) is a refreshing example of what can happen and what can be learned when these two foci are brought together. Such an approach was taken in seven communities in Sacramento, California.

For many, this approach represents new territory with high risks and the implementation of such an effort can be challenging. Hence, the program must build in safeguards. The specific scope or target of the community development initiatives did not seem to be as important as other considerations in leading to successful outcomes. For example, successful projects included engagement by adults who recognize the potential of youth. Providing support for youth as they assumed leadership roles within the community was also a critical consideration. This often required a reorientation of projects. Through these experiences, the capacity and interests of youth were built as they participated in community development efforts. The outcomes led to students who are better integrated into the community. In some instances, their families benefitted from the experiences as well. Likewise, the adult participants gained new respect for the potential of including youth and the contributions they can make to local development.

Effective community change intervention requires broad-based support. Campbell and Erbstein focus on the importance of bringing youth and young adults into the community change process. An equally important population is low income residents. Wilson, Long, and Smith (2012) focus on the latter population and report on a transformational program called step up to leadership (SUL) in the state of Missouri. The program uses many of the building blocks cited by other authors but focuses more on disadvantaged residents, especially women, in an effort to better integrate them into community enhancement efforts.

Interviews with SUL graduates and other participants were part of the data collection and evaluative process. Results suggest that SUL participants improved their ability to interact with others; gained increased understanding of civic responsibility and awareness of local resources; improved their knowledge of and engagement in community issues; and grew in self-confidence, employability and optimism. The hope is that these program participants can also play an inspirational role for peers, create strong bonding social capital among participants, and generate productive bridging social capital between the participants and influential people in the community. Ultimately, this leads to better opportunities for low income populations and a strengthened overall community dynamic.

Allen and Lachapelle (2012) report on the skills and roles played by community coaches in community development initiatives. Their reference point is *Horizons*, a relational leadership development program that has reached nearly 300 communities in seven states. Its goal is to reduce poverty in rural areas by promoting local leadership and focusing community action on poverty reduction strategies. The educational and leadership components focus on the causes of poverty, consequences, and how collective action within the community could bring about change through effective leadership. Despite a common curriculum, the experiences of *Horizons* communities have varied tremendously. Allen and Lachapelle (2012) argue that much of this variation may be due to different implementation strategies and tactics and that the ''community coach'' variable may be of special importance.

In order to explore this concept further, their study examines the *Horizons* programs in Montana and Minnesota. Each state used a different type of community coach. In Montana a local Extension Educator from within the community was used. In Minnesota the coach did not live in the community but was hired with significant expertise in leadership and community knowledge although relatively little local knowledge of the community's history and institutional infrastructure.

Results of the study suggest that *Horizons* has the potential to profoundly affect a community's sense of identity and fundamentally change residents' willingness to become engaged in their communities to make improvements. In terms of the skills and roles of the community coaches, the authors argue for a balance between content expertise and community connectedness. Too much of one of these qualities in a coach without enough of the other may reduce the potential of a program to change communities. This principle likely holds for a broad variety of community change initiatives.

While many authors focused on leadership development within a community, the work of Lichenstein and Lyons (2012) is much different by concentrating on a systems-wide approach to entrepreneurship development for the province of Saskatchewan. Although system-oriented and province-wide, flexibility is emphasized with special importance placed on recognizing the very different skills, needs and backgrounds of entrepreneurs. The Lichenstein and Lyons' system framework recognizes both the skills of entrepreneurs and the stage or life-cycle of the business. These two dimensions are the foundation for creating the Saskatchewan Pipeline of Entrepreneurs and Enterprises.

Planning and implementation of the framework involved a broad scope of awareness building and data gathering activities, including presentations and interviews with entrepreneurs and service providers. In addition to mapping a pipeline for the entire province, 18 other pipelines were identified and mapped: 13 regional areas; three demographic groups; and two market sectors. The pipeline framework proved useful in generating a variety of important programmatic activities, meaningful recommendations and other actionable items and outcomes.

Although much of the emphasis was at the provincial level, key community development principles were employed, such as inclusivity and modeling other ''best practices'' of the change process as the Pipeline was designed and made operational. Results to date include (a) an increase in cooperation among service providers; (b) a new way of thinking about entrepreneurship; (c) a customer-centered, rather than too-centered, approach by service providers; and (d) a greater appreciation for systems thinking.

Summary

Community change is difficult in most communities but, as subsequent articles show, effective programs can bring about change. Several key considerations for success were identified earlier in this overview article and subsequent authors will describe programs that have used these principles to cause effective changes in their communities.

Key among the common characteristics of these programs is the concept of community readiness and the importance of strong local champions and leaders. Sensitivity to the specific needs and contributions that can be made by youth, low-income populations and women are also critical elements of the community change

process. In addition, community change is both about the science and the art. For example, successful programs tend to be built on solid theoretical and research foundations. However, strong program design is a necessary, but not sufficient condition, "for success". Due diligence, creativity, and flexibility in the implementation phase become the sufficient conditions.

Another common characteristic of the exemplary programs and initiatives featured in this volume is the capacity to think both short-term and long-term, and build a strong evaluation component along this time horizon.

Finally, successful programs must build the capacity for the change process to continue and to create a comfort level with change and the importance of community resiliency to address unforeseen challenges and opportunities.

We noted earlier that "change is inevitable, but progress is optional." Community development scholars and practitioners have the important role and responsibility of helping communities see progress, not just change, as something that is inevitable. The articles in this Special Issue hopefully will contribute to that outcome.

Note

1. This group includes representatives from Iowa State University, Michigan State University, Northern Illinois University, Purdue University and the Heartland Center for Leadership.

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