SERVICE LEARNING AND OUTREACH AS COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION CATALYSTS IN RURAL APPALACHIA

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Introduction

- Associate Professor of Public Administration
  - West Virginia University
- Previous career as a consultant and Executive Director of a Community Development Corporation
  - Tempe, Arizona
Community capacity and its relationship to federalism in local governance
Community Capacity

- Readiness for community and economic development
  - Organizational and financial capacity
  - Civic and social capacity

- Readiness for outreach and service learning
  - Sufficient community capacity to take advantage of technical assistance
Case Background
Host Community ("the City")

Selection criteria met:
- less than 10,000 residents
- a desire for comprehensive planning
- ample natural environmental assets
- historical reliance on a non-mining primary employer
- evidence of outmigration and economic decline
- specific and viable reasons to be optimistic about economic growth due to local assets or regional trends
- opportunities for synergistic collaboration with other faculty and programs within the University
Service Learning & Outreach

- We are here to work *with* the community, not *for* you

- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)
  - All deliverables from the University team
    - Led by “the Professor”
    - Master of Public Administration graduate students
    - Several other professors and their graduate students
    - VISTA volunteer placed in the community for transition out
  - All responsibilities of the City
The Program

- Designed to move communities along a proven developmental path...
  - capacity building and baseline research
  - mobilizing and engaging the public
  - visioning and strategic planning
  - project design and implementation

- Four consecutive semesters (2 years)
  - No summer activities in between
Year 1 Deliverables

- Local Governance
  - Two-day stakeholder training in local governance topics
  - Community Profile report
  - First Impressions assessment report
  - Civic Index Survey and report

- Public Engagement
  - One-day stakeholder training
  - Public Engagement Plan and Policy Manual
  - Community Quality of Life Conversations (4) facilitation and report
Year 2 Deliverables

- **Public Planning**
  - Community Capitals inventory
  - White papers on community-identified topics
  - Participatory Planning Charrettes (2)
  - Draft Comprehensive Plan

- **Sustainable Community Development**
  - Organizational Capacity mapping exercise
  - Project selection and delegation to Community Action Teams
  - Project Implementation Plans (4)
Final Products: Project Plans

- Paddler’s Landing
  - Non-motorized boat put-in and associated park

- Council Bluff Park
  - Park with historical significance as one of George Washington’s 1770 campsites along the Ohio River

- First Frontier Welcome Center
  - Adaptive reuse of the historic Lock Master’s House

- Marina and Brownfields Redevelopment
  - A long-term, 2-phase project with a stopover marina and relocation of the wastewater treatment facility
RAEVNSWOOD FERRY
From about 1840 to 19?? a ferry across the Ohio River operated at this site. With the completion of the Route 33 William S. Ritchie Bridge in 1981, the ferry operation became redundant. Operations ended in 19???

Bank Stabilization | Parking Lot | Natural Put-In | Additional Parking | Park | Wellness Path
WASHINGTON’S CAMP
George Washington surveyed the land in this area in 1770 for distribution to military veterans. On November 6th, he and his men camped on this site, holding council with Kiasutha, a Seneca and Six Nation Chief and guide.
Case Study
Data Sources

- Community surveys
- Participant observations during community visits
- Reflective journals submitted by students after every community visit
- University team discussions of various experiences
- Written communications between University and community stakeholders
- Documents and reports delivered to the host community
Diagnostic Approach

- Constraints and affordances of the federalist system
- Performance in accordance with the MOU
- Financial barriers to community capacity
- Civic barriers to community capacity
Constraints and Affordances

- Statutory control over governing bodies
  - Municipalities
  - Citizen bodies (boards, commissions, authorities)
- Statutory control over financial policy
  - For all governing bodies
- Statutory control over municipal utilities
- Local reliance on state and federal funds
Performance per MOU

- University team
  - All deliverables submitted according to schedule
  - High levels of satisfaction reported by community members (surveys)
  - Top grades earned by students

- City
  - Poor logistics
  - Failure to provide necessary information
  - Lack of participation by City officials and staff
  - Poor transparency and communications
Missing Capitals?

- Human
- Organizational
- Social
Financial Barriers to Community Capacity

- The most common reason given by City leaders for a lack of community revitalization
- True, but largely due to poor financial planning and management
  - Opaque budget procedure; incremental adjustment
  - Substandard documentation; difficult to interpret
  - Large spending gaps between specified revenues and associated functions
  - Virtually no capital improvements funds
  - Lack of political will to reduce services or increase revenue (fees, tax rates, etc.)
Missing Capitals?

- Human
- Organizational
- Political
Civic Barriers to Community Capacity

- Negative attitudes
  - It seems like our community, especially its leaders, are more interested in blaming and complaining, rather than doing what ACTUALLY is needed to improve the community.
  - Unfortunately, there is far too much infighting and not enough compromise, consensus, and cooperation.
  - The members of this community are their own worst enemy. They are myopic, malcontent, and hate only two things: change, and the way things are.
Civic Barriers to Community Capacity

- Competing factions—Us-and-Thm
  - Those “[Name]-ites”
  - Our town is not together, it’s small but broken into many pieces.
  - Services such as trash collecting, road work, and etc. are very biased, with more work being done around “favorites” and richer neighborhoods than the rest of the populace.
  - The citizenry are factious and clannish. They neither seek the good of the many nor strive to aid groups who want a better future for the town. Progress is held hostage to old ideologies and sterilized memories of an image of the town that never existed except in the minds of the town’s aging power brokers.
Civic Barriers to Community Capacity

- Lack of political will
  - ...without cooperative leaders in the community efforts on this end will be fruitless.
  - Lots of decisions are made privately and not in council meetings.
  - Although open meetings are held our city council doesn’t like confrontation or ideas of development from our citizens.
  - From my perspective I find that the leadership within our community doesn’t agree, nor get along. This has been a long standing problem and leads to quality community members from wanting to get involved.
Civic Barriers to Community Capacity

- Unwilling to collaborate
  - I could not help but wonder how a small town, so tired of their situation and shouting for help to change could show such disinterest and disrespect for those who had come to answer their pleas.
  - …town leaders have a history of not engaging with these county-wide organizations because they say too much focus is given to [Other Town], the county seat.
  - State funding is a problem for the City because [Leader Name] was using social media to openly bash higher level politicians because of partisan reasons.
Civic Barriers to Community Capacity

- Unwilling to change
  - The city council seems to just want to do the same thing that they have been doing for years, regardless of compliance to state/city law or whether it has been effective in the past. They seem to want to keep the status quo, even that is detrimental to the community.
  - [University team member] better not tell me to change anything I do!
Civic Barriers to Community Capacity

- Lack of follow through
  - I attended a meeting a few years ago where they were talking and had some great plans for the park, they brought in some outsiders who were helping with the plan. The mayor and city council did not show up to take part in the meeting. The project fell flat—no wonder. Until the citizens of [Town] decide to put their animosity aside and work together for the good of the town it will not prosper.
Refusal to accept responsibility

Our little town is dying and the citizens are allowing it to happen. Poverty and lack of opportunity play a large role in that but so does complacency. It seems as though everyone has given up and everyone is expecting “someone” to fix it for them. City Government is clearly not getting the job done and the citizens just sit back and allow it to happen. How do you restore pride in a town? Desire to improve?
Response from a very active, highly involved board member of the Development Authority:

Community Member: Great job kids!! Can’t wait to see what they do next…

Professor: Who is they? 😊

Community Member: City and the people who will push this ahead.

Professor: I hope you’re one of them… It’s the [Development Authority]’s gig!
Missing Capitals?

- Human
- Social
- Political
- Organizational
Conclusions & Recommendations
Conclusions

- Can we catalyze community revitalization in rural Appalachia?

- Sadly, our findings suggest that we cannot when we meet these communities where they are...
  - Service learning limited to course content and purpose
  - Outreach limited by other faculty responsibilities and travel distances
  - Communities can’t pay for additional services
Recommendations

- Amend program design
  - Assess readiness more deeply
    - Find communities that can actually benefit
  - Adjust trainings provided to give some more basics
    - More in the first course, Local Governance
  - Add other intensive service learning components
    - Public Finance, Public Budgeting, and Public Management

- But *much* more is needed!
  - BASIC operations training for governing bodies
  - Circuit-rider city managers
MANY THANKS!!

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