Community Development

The pedagogy and the practice of community visioning: evaluating effective community strategic planning in rural Montana

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Community visioning is increasingly used as a community development technique in a variety of settings. Sixteen communities in rural eastern Montana participated in a multi-phase poverty reduction program from 2006 to 2008 that culminated in a community vision process. Regional workshops were delivered to community visioning coordinators at the onset to explain principles of visioning and coaching, set expectations, and provide concrete guidelines and ideas on ways to implement the program. Using a case study approach, we conducted a series of focus group interviews to better understand the usefulness of the workshops, and the changes and actions that resulted from visioning. Results show the importance of a coordinated training program prior to the visioning program in each community and how intangible outcomes, including increased trust, improved relationships, and a sense of ownership in the process, were also significant factors both during and subsequent to the visioning program.

Keywords: poverty; visioning; citizen-based planning; community development; qualitative data

Introduction

The use of community visioning is increasingly cited as an efficient and effective means of identifying core community values, prioritizing goals and strategies, and implementing community plans, policies, and decisions (Aigner, Flora, Tirmizi, & Wilcox, 1999; Bloom, 2000; Bodeen & Hilliker, 1999; Christenson & Robinson, 1989; Flora & Flora, 2008; Green et al., 2001; Green & Haines, 2007; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997; Peterson, 1995; Potapchuk, 1996; Walzer, 1996). Community visioning is a citizen-based planning process in which different sectors of a community collectively determine a desired future state and coordinate a plan of action. Ultimately, community visioning necessitates identifying and empowering diverse stakeholders within a community who are actively engaged throughout a community planning effort (Flora & Flora, 2008).

Sixteen communities in rural Montana participated in a multi-phase poverty reduction program from 2006 to 2008 that culminated in a community vision process. The communities were distributed across the south central and eastern portion of the state with over 500 miles between the furthest communities.

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The program was initiated and guided by the Extension Service based at Montana State University (MSU) and involved county Extension educators, citizens, and outside visioning facilitators in each of the communities. Funding for the program was provided by a large philanthropic foundation whose mission is to reduce poverty in northwest United States. Communities were provided a small stipend to assist with program implementation including funds for training, special events, travel, advertising, and minimal reimbursement of time for various members of the community who contributed to training and coordination of the program. Communities were not charged to participate in the program, but were asked to provide citizen commitment in terms of time and effort to complete the program.

The community visioning process in each community focused specifically on addressing poverty, with a deliberate emphasis on incorporating diverse populations including low income, youth, elderly and single parents in the visioning efforts. These individuals were specifically targeted and asked to participate using in-person invitations. The individuals were also informed that minor expenses such as transportation to events, childcare, and light meals would be available. In addition, other key stakeholders in the communities were informed of the program and encouraged to participate including elected officials, business owners, and clergy. Communities were encouraged to use innovative strategies in delivering the visioning programs by engaging local citizens throughout the entire visioning process. The process began with the creation of a steering committee made up of local citizens to lead the entire process. The committee was charged with the specific duties of distributing a pre-visioning survey, coordinating the community visioning events, and organizing various action forums to move the process forward. The steering committee members received formal training on the various steps involved in the visioning process through a series of workshops provided by Extension educators, university faculty, and visioning facilitators. The visioning process itself, however, was completely community-driven.

This research provides an analysis of the visioning process in 16 communities using a case study approach and series of post-visioning event focus groups and individual interviews. Specifically, the objectives of this research are to:

(1) Evaluate the training process from the perspective of community members on the content and techniques for the visioning process;
(2) Identify follow-up activities that have resulted from the visioning process including effectiveness of involving diverse segments of the population in the action forums;
(3) Determine changes in future visioning program delivery in a new 2008–2010 program in central and western Montana.

While the long-term impacts resulting from the visioning efforts in each community are still developing and yet to be fully realized, important lessons have emerged that can contribute to the overall performance of present and future visioning efforts in the same region and elsewhere.

A framework of visioning

Community visioning is often defined as a citizen-based planning process in which diverse members of a community use collaboration and consensus-building

techniques to collectively define an issue, identify community assets, and determine a desired future through a coordinated plan of action. Crafting a vision is as much about process as it is about outcomes and requires encouraging purposeful reflection on a coordinated strategy, action and future-oriented thinking. With regard to poverty, a visioning process can bring together many disparate factions within a community to help identify key causes, understand shared values and assets, and create and implement a tangible plan of action.

Community visioning is increasingly used as a community development technique in a variety of settings. For example, visioning has been applied as a way to confront urban decay (Murtagh, 2001), to address economic change (Brown-Graham & Austin, 2004; Weinberg, 1999), as a way of identifying leaders (Sandmann & Kroshus, 1991), as a method of increasing legislative support (Fetsch & Bolen, 1989), to manage tensions associated with multiculturalism (Uyesugi & Shipley, 2005), to encourage a more participatory democratic process in community planning and development (McKinlay, 2006; Plein, Green, & Williams, 1998), in corporate decision-making (Helling, 1998), in a range of international settings (Cuthill, 2004; Murtagh, 2001), and more generally, as a way to build trust and enhance relationships in communities (Flora & Flora, 2008). Community visioning emphasizes community assets rather than needs and identifies options and opportunities for the future (Green & Haines, 2007; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997).

Visioning can not only result in tangible outcomes through coordinated action and activity, but can result in community capacity building in a variety of ways. Sanginga and Chistiske (2005) describe community visioning as ''a highly interactive process for establishing dialogue and engaging [citizens] to identify opportunities and facilitate community action planning. It is a vehicle for creating awareness, learning about change, facilitating communities or groups to develop their visions of desired future conditions and for developing specific action plans and commitments to action'' (p. 17). In this sense, visioning becomes a capacity building process that identifies and explores the potential of the community through dialogue and a commitment to action. A myriad of methods exist to plan and implement a visioning process. Research on process and outcomes related to community visioning contribute to a growing body of scholarship on the pedagogy and practice of community visioning. A visioning process can bring a community together when strategies are lacking, incompatible, or antagonistic or when there is confusion or conflict about goals and strategies. Community visioning provides the opportunity for citizens to determine and guide specific actions by outlining the range of possibilities both in the short- and long-term.

The pedagogy and practice of community visioning

While a prescriptive model of how to teach a community visioning process is less than exact or widely agreed upon, some common themes have emerged in the literature. The pedagogy of community visioning has been refined to include a number of tangible stages or steps. For Walzer et al. (1995), the visioning process involves three distinct stages; first, the formation of a diverse leadership group that takes primary reasonability for the community planning efforts; second, a series of open community meetings and forums that result in the identification of priority goals and action strategies; and last, an implementation stage with a coordinated

action plan that is consistently revisited and revised. Ayers (1996) expands this work and presents a ten-step model to explain the community visioning process. The process involves forming a steering committee, developing plans for community forums, holding a series of meetings that identify community strengths and issues (in addition to the vision exercise), forming task forces, seeking feedback, and last, drafting, implementing, monitoring, revising and celebrating the community's plan and accomplishments. Step two of Walzer et al.' s (1995) model is further articulated by Ames (2006) who details five separate steps with related actions and descriptions. These steps are detailed in Table 1.

Each of these models provides a framework to guide the community visioning process and each can be used to teach the concept of visioning as well as the methods of implementing visioning in a community context. These frameworks were used to inform and direct community members in each of the communities involved in this research.

In addition to these fundamental principles of community visioning, communities were also introduced to the concept of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This approach to visioning is increasingly used in community development (Booy & Ole Sena, 1997), and is becoming a common practice in the evaluative process of community design, planning, implementation, and assessment (Hallie & Catsambas, 2006). Appreciative Inquiry is based on the premise that people can gain more from focusing on what is working well as opposed to planning efforts that begin with problem identification. Using AI in a visioning process involves engaging people in conversation and the sharing of stories around what is working well. In addition, the process involves deconstructing stories to identify the positive core underlying current successes thus promoting positive relationships. The approach enhances a community's ability and capacity for collaboration and change focusing on four D's: (1) Discovery through the identification of the positive core underlying what is working well; (2) Dreaming by envisioning how the positive core can work even better and what that might look like in the future; (3) Design through planning and prioritizing and; (4) Destiny (or Delivery) via the implementation of the proposed design. Using this approach, opportunities are created through dialogue and discourse using a process that links the exchange of ideas to a concrete vision and ultimately to a realistic set of actions. Community members were encouraged to consider and apply this framework when conducting the visioning process in their own communities.

Table 1. Five steps of community visioning based on Ames (2006).

Visioning Step	Action	Description
Step 1: Where are we now?	Community Profiling	Find descriptive data; Identify community values
Step 2: Where are we going?	Trends Analysis	Obtain trend data; Determine probable scenarios
Step 3: Where do we want to be?	Vision Statement	Possible/Preferred scenarios; Community vision
Step 4: How do we get there?	Action Plan	Goals/Actions/Strategies
Step 5: Are we getting there?	Implement and Monitor	Plan execution; Community indicators/Benchmarks

Case study background: visioning in rural Montana communities

Many areas of rural Montana are experiencing trends and changes that necessitate planning and visioning exercises. Poverty rates in many rural communities in Montana are well above national averages (Harrison & Watrus, 2004; Proctor & Dalaker, 2003). These rural agricultural and ranching areas tend to generally exhibit higher unemployment, lower levels of education, limited access to healthcare options (Smith, 2008), and economic and social pressures from out-migration and an aging population (Johnson, 2004; Von Reichert, 2002).

The 16 communities in this case study were all involved in a coordinated program to address poverty and economic change in their regions. Initiated by MSU Extension, this process culminated in a community visioning component. The communities range in population from 139 to 4089 with poverty rates from 10.2% to 40.9% based on the US Census Bureau criteria.[1] The program includes several tribal communities.

Regional workshops were organized and offered by Extension faculty based at MSU (herein, the MSU Extension Leadership Team) and held in the summer and fall of 2007 to introduce the principles of visioning and provide detailed steps on the visioning process. Invitations were sent to local steering committee members, visioning facilitators, Extension educators, and citizens in each community. Each of these groups of individuals played different roles in their respective communities; Extension educators served as community coaches to provide assistance and guidance; the steering committee members worked with community budgets and organized the logistical details of the visioning process; the visioning facilitator facilitated and directed the visioning events; and citizens were involved in the workshops in order to be better informed of the visioning process and to encourage their fellow community members to join in the process. The visioning facilitator was chosen in consultation with the steering committee and coach by the MSU Extension Leadership Team. This individual was brought in from outside each community with the intention of being a neutral individual who would objectively facilitate and direct the visioning events. The workshops brought together these key individuals from 16 communities with the specific objectives to:

(1) Explain fundamental principles of community visioning;
(2) Introduce the concept and role of the community coach who would assist with the visioning process;
(3) Establish basic expectations of successful implementation of the program through coordinated events and community thresholds and;
(4) Provide ideas to promote community inclusiveness for the visioning process.

The workshop stressed key points of visioning as a synthesis of Ames (2006), Ayers (1996) and Walzer et al. (1995) and the Appreciative Inquiry method through handouts and dialogue. Participants were engaged in discussion on the steps and actions necessary to implement the visioning process in each community. The concept of the community coach was described and discussed at the workshops to ensure there was clear understanding of this role in the process. The term was described to workshop participants as distinct from individual, business or organizational coaching in that the basic objective is to engage participants at the community-level and support them in developing the capacity to identify and achieve

their own goals. It was explained that contrary to the mentoring and expert model which may rely on a personal coach, the community coach focuses on group learning, capacity-building, partnerships, inclusively, diversity and the importance of collaborative processes.

Basic expectations of visioning were also presented. The threshold of involving 15% of the community population (correspondingly ranging from 20 individuals to over 700) was iterated as a way to encourage community involvement. A series of specific ideas and activities were presented that could be used in the various visioning steps and stages. This list of activities was provided to assist communities in reaching their thresholds and included the following:

(1) Communitywide survey (ex. on-line, in-person, mail back);
(2) A "visioning booth" at community events (i.e., county fair, community picnics, 4th of July activities, etc);
(3) Public community gathering with butcher paper posted on the walls to allow the community to write/draw visioning statements;
(4) School activities involving children in a "Future of our Community" essay contest, the distribution of digital cameras and a photo scavenger hunt of local assets, art class assignments depicting the community in 2020, and the video taping of interviews with senior citizens and creation of a documentary of "Visions from the Past."

The communities were given the flexibility to craft their own process and design in implementing a visioning program based on the frameworks of Walzer et al. (1995), Ayers (1996) and Ames (2006). The coach was asked to work closely with the steering committee in each community. The visioning activities and events were planned as a collaborative effort between the coach, steering committee, facilitator, and interested citizens. The marketing and planning was undertaken by the community members with help from the MSU Extension Leadership Team.

Methodology

The methodology used in this research is exploratory and descriptive primarily relying on case study research design using focus group sessions and select one-on-one interviews with individuals or groups. The goal was not to find statistically generalizable data but rather to capture a range of experiences or belief systems in rich detail with greater attention to specificity of key elements in the community process in order to increase the depth of understanding of process and outcome (Patterson & Williams, 2001). The case study approach allowed for a thorough assessment of the community as a single case from which to understand and explore unique characteristics and provide an in-depth and contextual exploration of each community visioning process (Yin, 2002). By using a case study approach, visioning can be better understood in terms of the specific approaches used, the process followed, and the resulting outcomes within each community.

The case study method relied on narratives provided by community coaches, visioning facilitators, steering committee members, and community citizens taking part in the focus groups and interviews. In addition, the focus groups sessions and the one-on-one interviews were supplemented by participant observations throughout the community visioning process. The focus group sessions and one-on-one

interviews occurred during the fall of 2008 and the spring of 2009 and took place in five of the participating communities involving 42 individuals who had participated in the vision program. Members from all the communities were invited to participate in the focus group sessions and in the one-on-one interviews. At least one individual was recruited to represent a community or group of communities in proximity. The sessions and interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and detailed notes were taken both during the session.

In addition to basic demographic and logistical information, five open-ended questions were used to guide the conversations during the focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews. Interviews were conducted by the lead author and with other members of the MSU Extension Leadership Team. Focus group questions included the following:

(1) Describe the positive changes that have taken place in your community as a result of the visioning process, both short-term and long-term?
(2) Specifically, how have community visioning, community coaching and the resulting actions benefited your community? Your region?
(3) What specific projects have resulted from the program?
(4) Tell us about the direction, guidance and training you received during the workshops on community visioning and community coaching?
(5) What worked well and what could the Leadership Team have improved?

Responses from the focus group members generated a rich data set of descriptions and personal narratives. Key words and themes were identified to better understand similarities and differences in each community associated with the visioning process. The primary objective of the research was to use open-ended responses to generate descriptions and narratives in order to better understand the particular characteristics of how the visioning process worked or did not work in each community. A final coding scheme was identified and used as a framework to summarize and represent major themes across all the communities. This coding scheme represents principle topics, ideas, and perspectives emerging from focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews that were shared among many or all the focus group and interview participants. These major themes are presented as results of the research in addition to descriptions and explanations pertaining to their context and purpose.

Results and discussion

Five distinct themes emerged from the community focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews. These themes emerged as elements of the workshops and visioning process that helped assist with program implementation and enhanced community involvement. These themes are presented with a brief explanation and description.

Theme 1. Principles of coaching

The first theme that emerged from the interviews was an in-depth discussion on the importance of having a community member who would serve in the position as coach. This role was described as integral to ensure the community had the necessary resources to plan events, achieve their milestones, and stay on track by meeting

deadlines and thresholds. The coach was highly regarded in the communities as the individual responsible for the overall coordination of the process but was also described as someone who was valued because they did not dictate policies or push a hidden agenda.

The use of a community coach, overall, was seen as fundamental to the community vision process, particularly when there was confusion or contention over decisions or assessments that might come up. In several cases, the coach was described as the ''neutral arbiter'' since they were seen to be serving a role that would ensure the process was fair, equitable and efficient. The coach was also called on to provide resources or materials to keep the process moving forward.

Theme 2. Ownership

The second general theme involved the evolution of a sense of ownership over the process. Respondents described an empowered feeling as they had access to the necessary resources through a coordinated system guided by the Extension Leadership Team. Community members also felt they were given flexibility to determine the specific processes and outcomes of the visioning program. This sense of empowerment was in several cases referred to as being able to ''own'' the vision themselves, instead of having the visioning process dictated from afar.

Respondents spoke often about the freedom to plan around what would work best in their community and the importance of this freedom to move the visioning process forward. The lack of stringent timelines or deadlines to follow, and the flexibility to design a process that would relate to the idiosyncrasies of the community and its residents was described as a positive element. For example, one community initiated a barn dance and ''pitchfork fondue'' and also used butcher block paper on the walls for participants to write and comment on each other's vision statements.

Another aspect of ownership that was discussed in the communities was the trust, relationship building, and shared sense of future that resulted from the process and outcome. Trust and improved relationships were described in detail with individuals stating they felt closer to their neighbors, understood and appreciated differences in values and opinions, and trusted citizens and government officials alike as a result of working together on the process. This sense of ownership in both process and outcome also engendered a collaborative environment whereby a diverse population became involved in visioning events and action forums. Many individuals commented that the process brought together individuals who they had never seen at a public function including single mothers, elderly, and youth, and who they felt added depth and creativity to the visioning process.

Theme 3. A palette of ideas and actions

Respondents also spoke at length on the availability of resources in terms of specific ideas and actions from which to choose to better plan the visioning process. This guidance was described as instrumental in inspiring community members to be actively involved in thinking creatively about how their visioning process could succeed in their community.

Among the valuable ideas and actions referenced in the interviews was the use of community-wide surveys, the different ways to exploit existing community events

such as the county fair (for example using paper pendants that attendees would write on and then would hang at the fair for all to see and read), and different ideas for involving the community's youth in various aspects of the visioning process such as art class assignments posted in prominent public areas for the entire community to view and comment on. The ideas and actions were appreciated because they were not imposed but rather suggested, and individuals responded they could use and build on the ideas that came from the workshops as well as from other communities.

Theme 4. Clear instructions and guidelines

Respondents also mentioned the need to have clear instructions and guidelines about the visioning process in their communities. It was clear that background knowledge and instructions and guidelines received at the workshops regarding how visioning was defined, the steps that might be involved, and what other communities had done in the past, were greatly appreciated. The instructions and guidelines was described not as being a prescriptive plan of action, but rather an approximate roadmap of possible scenarios and options that the community could discuss or attempt to initiate. Respondents were particularly appreciative of the synthesis of the previously described steps and stages from the literature and how these steps might be realized in their own communities.

Theme 5. Use of technologies

The last theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of various technologies used in the community visioning process. Among the most often cited technologies was the use of blogs in which all the communities participated (see for example, http://montana.communityblogs.us/), the convenience of having a list serve that would enable all communities to receive current information quickly, and the use of a central website that was created to post files containing relevant information that all could easily access and share.

The discussions during the interviews were centered on how community members addressed their need to develop and implement adequate communication within the community in order to post current information on meetings and events and to share more general information on how the visioning process was progressing. In addition, community members also appreciated the feeling of being connected to the other communities that were participating in their own visioning programs in order to share ideas, learn what other communities were doing, and make use of this new knowledge, concepts, and actions from posting on the blog sites. The use of new technologies as part of the visioning process, including the potential for improved communications, idea generation, and historical documentation, was described to be a significant aspect of promoting the visioning process for these communities.

If the visioning process is described as linking dialogue to action, we found many tangible outcomes, actions and activities that had resulted from the visioning process. The visioning activities were all well-attended in each of the communities. Table 2 presents the community population, poverty rate, and percent of population involved in the visioning process.

While there is great disparity between the various communities in terms of population and poverty rates, each of the communities were able to meet the 15% threshold by involving between 15% and 77% of the community in various visioning

Table 2. Community population, poverty rate, and percentage of the population involved in visioning.

Community	Population (US Census 2000)	Poverty Rate (%, US Census 2000)	Population involved in Visioning (%)
Anaconda	4089	16	23
Big Timber	1768	11	20.5
Boulder	1445	16	16.7
Brockway	140	18.8	33.6
Columbus	1931	14	15
Crow Agency	1552	40.9	17.5
Culbertson	714	11	38
Forsyth	1898	11	20
Harlowton	899	10.3	18
Melstone	139	11.2	35
Roundup	1953	20	20.6
Scobey	958	13	19
Terry	549	13.3	21
White Sulphur	1002	13	26
Whitehall	1156	12	77
Wibaux	485	10.2	28

activities. Numerous activities and actions resulted from the visioning process in each community. Table 3 presents several actions that resulted from the visioning process in each of the 16 communities to illustrate reported measures of successful visioning processes.

Table 3 provides just a partial list of the accomplishments in each community which by themselves show significant success in terms of identifying a vision and mobilizing the community to act. There were many quantitative measures of the visioning process that provide evidence of a successful outcome. For example, in Boulder, a committee was formed after the community visioning activities to examine the feasibility of renovating some of the older buildings in the community and providing affordable housing options for low income families. As a result, there are currently five houses now being constructed and renovated. The committee has also secured a $10,000 grant for a new Community Learning Center. In Crow Agency, a men's health group was formed after the visioning activities identified health and wellness as major obstacles to development. To date, over 17 community meetings have been held and attended by over 150 Crow men. The group has also recently submitted a major grant proposal to the National Institutes of Health for a cancer screening initiative. In Anaconda, a Certified Nurse Aide Training Program was created with the first class of nine individuals graduating in the spring of 2009. Community members also established the Anaconda Community Foundation with donations now totaling nearly $30,000 and opportunities for mini-grants offered to the community. Finally, in Whitehall, community members who participated in the visioning efforts took the initiative to write a proposal and were awarded a $750,000 grant to address underage drinking. While it is difficult to gauge which outcomes have had most the meaningful and long-term impact in each community, there is little doubt that both the monetary rewards and the community capacity building are equally significant results.

All of these accounts are meant to provide evidence of the many quantitative and objective measures of success achieved through particular events, activities and

Table 3. Actions and activities resulting from the visioning process in each of the 16 communities.

Community	Action/Activity
Anaconda	Established local Certified Nursing Assistant training program, community beautification program and community foundation
Big Timber	Organized community self-sustaining food system; Established a food bank
Boulder	Formed formal Community Development Organization; Organized historic preservation group; Published a community resource guide; Partnered with nearby communities to offer free spay and neuter clinics
Brockway	Raised over $50,000 for community foundation; Helped expand the broadcasting license of local low-power FM radio station
Columbus	Created new community foundation; Created a local farmer's market; Began an after-school program
Crow Agency	Facilitated youth attending the First People's Youth Camp for American Indian Youth; Established the Crow Men's Health Project
Culbertson	Identified and addressed community food bank needs; Produced a community asset brochure
Forsyth	Created community foundation; Organized the first Forsyth Trash Bash, a now-annual event to clean-up the town; Began a yard of the week program to encourage beautification
Harlowton	Established a scholarship for a graduating senior as an incentive for youth to remain drug and alcohol free; Established a community garden
Melstone	Established the Melstone Area Chamber of Commerce; Established a community center which serves as a youth center and senior center; Began a farmers market; Created an historical walking tour
Roundup	Created the Musselshell Valley Neighbors web page to improve communications; Wrote successful grant to update equipment at local hospital; Organized a clean-up day at the fairgrounds
Scobey	Partnered with nearby communities on housing grants; Fundraising activities to support meals for senior citizens
Terry	Initiated multi-community foundation; Conducting a feasibility study on affordable housing and assisted living options
White Sulphur	Developed and implemented a beautification plan; Established community garden; Investigating wind energy generation
Whitehall	Created community development board to advise the town council; Established a "sweat equity" building project for six homes to be built; Received grant to educate youth about drinking and driving; Added high school leadership curriculum
Wibaux	Created Community Action Now committee; Improved bathrooms in the city park; Developed a brand new medical clinic to serve the community

actions. These actions were the direct result of the community vision process and are the tangible outcomes that all in the community can see and experience. While these tangible actions are important by-products of the process, the intangible outcomes that were observed throughout the visioning process are no less significant. These intangible outcomes include the previously mentioned notion of community ownership in the process and the resulting trust and relationship building. The tangible as well as intangible elements of the process were critical to the process, outcome and ultimately success of the vision program in each community. In addition, the previously mentioned involvement of diverse and often times excluded or non-participating members of the community is a significant outcome of the process. The inclusive nature of the community visioning process was a significant

factor in the large turnouts and active participation of multiple segments of the community. Ultimately, these indications of success, both tangible actions and the intangible outcomes, are laudable and illustrate the significance and value of the visioning process in each community.

The intent of the Leadership Team is to expand the program to additional communities in the state again emphasizing the educational component of pre-visioning training of community coaches, visioning facilitators, steering committee members, and community citizens through formal workshops and coordinated community visits. In particular, trainings and workshops that stress the principles of coaching, methods to inculcate a sense of ownership, suggested visioning process ideas and actions, clear instructions and guidelines to organizers, and opportunities to make use of various technologies, will continue to be areas of focus in future visioning projects.

Conclusions

This research presents an assessment of the visioning process and outcomes in 16 communities in rural Montana. Our objectives were to: (1) evaluate the training process; (2) identify follow-up activities that resulted from the CV process including effectiveness of involving diverse segments of the population; and (3) determine changes in future CV program delivery. Our focus groups were designed to evaluate the training process from the perspective of the community members. The results from these focus groups show that prior training offered through formal workshops to members of the community involved in coordinating the visioning process, including community coaches, visioning facilitators, steering committee members, and community citizens was an invaluable component of the process which left organizers and participants feeling better prepared and thus better able to execute the visioning program. Respondents reported many indications of success, including tangible actions and activities that each community committed to implement to address poverty. Individuals involved in the process also identified many intangible outcomes that are no less significant. These outcomes included increased trust, improved relationships, a feeling of ownership in the process, and the development of an inclusive environment. Respondents also indicated they felt a sense of ownership to be critical to a successful visioning outcome in each community.

Perhaps more importantly, the intangible outcomes resulting from the current visioning program can guide and promote increased responsiveness to future opportunities to address potential issues, opportunities or adversity. In this sense, the visioning process described here reflects the spiraling up of assets across the community capitals described by Emery and Flora (2006). Montana community participants also described how increased assets in the intangible capitals: social (increased trust and ability to access resources from outside the community), cultural (how people think about their situation), and political (ability to influence decisions) provide the foundation necessary to increase assets in the tangible capitals of financial, built, and human capital. Similarly, just as the spiraling up described by Flora and Emery (2006) began with social capital that brought new ideas into the community, these communities also benefited from the connections with MSU Extension which brought in new opportunities and ideas about how rural communities can seize control of their future.

Our research highlighted five components of our training program that contributed to success: coaching, community sense of ownership, access to a palette of ideas and success stories, clear instructions, and the use of technologies. A unique aspect of this work was the interaction between the expert/explicit/outside knowledge (training, best practices, and technical assistance) and the use of implicit/local knowledge about the community works. Thus, this research demonstrates the importance of formal training which offers participants access to explicit knowledge about the visioning and community change processes and examples of best practices from other places. This training, however, was not a lockstep method, but rather it focused on principles and practices encouraging the community team, with the help of the coach, to design the visioning process that would work best in their community.

The use of a coach also contributed to the ability of trainers and participants to blend sources of knowledge, information, and practices in ways that not only implemented the visioning process, but also built capacity for future community work at the same time. Respondent comments on the value of the coaching role indicate that access to tacit knowledge and knowledge development opportunities is equally important to community success not only in completing a successful visioning process but particularly in the implementation of that vision. The coaching role allows local tacit wisdom about how things work and what people care about to emerge in ways that encourage the new explicit knowledge to be applied in locally appropriate and effective ways.

The focus on inclusiveness played a key role in the success of the visioning process as well. Expanding beyond the small group of decision makers often found in rural communities to include people representative across the community brought new ideas, energy, and local knowledge to the process helping to break people out of tried and true patterns of dialogue and into creative conversations about future possibilities.

The use of technology in the project forced some people out of their comfort zones and at the same time gave new people, particularly youth, a way to make valued contributions to the visioning effort and to know that their voices were both heard and respected. The use of technology also contributed to the ability of community leaders to learn from one another.

Our second objective was to identify follow-up activities that resulted from the CV process including effectiveness of involving diverse segments of the population. We identified numerous activities as well as the intangible outcomes that resulted. In addition, we heard repeatedly that including single mothers, elderly, and youth, added depth and creativity to the visioning process. Clearly, a concerted effort to recruit and maintain the active engagement of these diverse segments of the population added significantly to the process.

Our last objective was to determine changes in future CV program delivery. As a result of this research, specifically, the fore mentioned themes that emerged from our visioning processes, we surmise that future visioning efforts will be best supported if a deliberate effort is made in formal training and program delivery at providing an overview of visioning concepts, explaining principles of coaching, allowing and encouraging flexibility and ownership over process and outcome, offering a palette of ideas and actions along with clear instructions and guidelines, and outlining the proper use of various technological options.

These communities and their success in creating and acting on a powerful positive vision of the future have much to teach us. In particular, participants were

supportive of this deviation from the standard "expert" approach of providing answers, specific processes, and lock-step programs. Their responses indicate the power of using training and technical assistance avenues to create powerful dialogues, co-constructed from community knowledge and experience and outside expertise to engage citizens and motivate them to action. Their ownership of the process and its outcome is directly related to their ability to see their values and hopes reflected in both newly emerging ways of working together and the vision that will guide those actions toward a brighter more prosperous community for all.

While the results of this research were meant to be descriptive and exploratory, there are some generalizations that may be applicable to other communities contemplating use of a visioning process. Principally, formal training programs before a community begins a visioning process can enhance background knowledge on steps and strategies, and ultimately, serve as a marketing tool to raise awareness of the costs and benefits of the program.

While individual descriptions of success are often less than the sum of their parts, this research on the pedagogy and practice of the visioning process illustrates the importance of a coordinated training program prior to visioning implementation accompanied by coaching resources focused toward successful community-owned visions. In this case study, more elusive or subtle intangible outcomes positively affected the communities. This sequence of intangible outcomes, combined with a legitimate community vision, a series of actions and activities, and enhanced interest by citizens in the community is likely to carry communities forward as they continue to face change and adversity in the present and future.

Note

1. Poverty is measured by the US Census Bureau by using 48 income thresholds that vary by family size and number of children within the family and age of the householder. For more information see the US Census Bureau "How the Census Bureau Measures Poverty (Official Measure)" retrieved April 2, 2009 from http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/povdef.html.

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