

Community Readiness

Entrepreneurs do not operate in a vacuum. Their success depends to some extent on the community environment that may support, or in some cases, hinder their ability to grow and prosper. Your community's first step in implementing an entrepreneurship program is to assess how well the community currently supports its entrepreneurs. Through fieldwork sponsored by the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, we have identified six **readiness factors** that can determine whether a community can build a successful entrepreneurship-based economic development program.

The **six readiness factors** are described below.

Openness to Entrepreneurship. Is the community open to exploring entrepreneurship as an economic development strategy? Central to such a commitment is the firm belief that within your community there are entrepreneurs who can create a new generation of successful businesses and there are service providers and community leaders willing to help them achieve success.

Balancing Business Attraction. Does the community balance a traditional economic development approach with a focus on local businesses and on energizing entrepreneurs to create and build homegrown enterprises? For 50 years, the mainstay economic development strategy has been business attraction, particularly the search for industries. Supporting entrepreneurship requires a willingness to broaden the economic development strategy beyond the traditional recruitment model.

Entrepreneurship Programs. Has your community had experience with entrepreneurship programs already? Check any of the following entrepreneurial programs that your community has experience with, either currently or in the past:

- Networking infrastructure for entrepreneurs
- Mentoring programs for entrepreneurs
- Efforts to improve business services for entrepreneurs
- Micro lending or other business financing services
- Entrepreneurial training programs such as “how to start a business” seminars or courses
- Business counseling services
- Youth entrepreneurship education programs
- Other programs specific to your community

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Willingness to Invest. Most rural communities have limited experience with entrepreneurial programs. Do not assume you cannot create an entrepreneurial development strategy if your experience with these kinds of programs is limited. What is most important is a willingness to develop and support these kinds of activities.

Leadership Team. Can your community create a team that will work on an entrepreneurial strategy? To be successful, a community needs a core leadership team committed to building and supporting an entrepreneurship program. Remember, as Margaret Mead once said, “Never forget that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Beyond Town Borders. Is your community willing to create partnerships with other area communities to find the human and financial resources in order to be in the economic development game? Are you willing to look outside the community’s borders to find the resources to support your entrepreneurs? In today’s competitive world, we must collaborate to create enough scale and capacity to support effective economic development strategies.

Ranking Your Community’s Readiness Factors

Based on your understanding of the above Community Readiness Factors, you can rank your community on each readiness factor using a 1–5 scale, where 1 is a limited degree of readiness and 5 is a high degree of readiness. This exercise is useful in terms of identifying areas that may need to be strengthened as your community pursues an entrepreneurship development strategy.

Score Card:	Not Ready			Very Ready	
Factor 1 – Openness to Entrepreneurship	1	2	3	4	5
Factor 2 – Balancing Business Attraction	1	2	3	4	5
Factor 3 – Entrepreneurship Programs	1	2	3	4	5
Factor 4 – Willingness to Invest	1	2	3	4	5
Factor 5 – Leadership Team	1	2	3	4	5
Factor 6 – Beyond Town Borders	1	2	3	4	5
Overall Score _____ (circle and sum)					
Understanding the Score					
1-6 Weak Score – Little Readiness – Capacity Building Required					
7-12 Soft Score – Some Readiness – Gap Filling Necessary					
13-18 Good Score – Readiness Potential – Begin to Build on Assets					
19-24 Strong Score – Readiness Present – Build on Assets					
25-30 Very Strong Score – Considerable Readiness – Energize Your Entrepreneurs					

Using this Tool to Assess Readiness

You can address these readiness factors as part of a focus group of community leaders and residents who have an interest in entrepreneurship. It is important to bring a diverse group of leaders together so that you get different perspectives on readiness. Service providers in your community, such as a business counselor with SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives) or the chamber president, may have very different views on the community's readiness for entrepreneurship development than the entrepreneurs themselves. Experienced entrepreneurs may view the community environment in a different way than do new start-up entrepreneurs. You should strive to get as many different views on your community's readiness as possible.

Once you've tabulated your readiness scores, you can use this information in two ways. The overall score can help give you and others in the community a sense of the starting point. Are we in a strong position as we begin to encourage entrepreneurs? Are we starting from scratch? This understanding can help you set realistic expectations for progress toward energizing entrepreneurs.

You can also use the scores for individual readiness factors to identify those parts of the community's environment that may require special attention as you develop an entrepreneurship strategy. If your score on **Openness to Entrepreneurship** is low, you might want to ramp up your public relations efforts quickly to begin introducing the community to its successful entrepreneurs in very visible ways – a celebrate “homegrown” entrepreneurs day or ribbon cutting. If your **Beyond Town Borders** score is low, you might want to charge a committee of town leaders with the immediate task of identifying and connecting with regional service providers who might bring additional resources to your local entrepreneurs.

Community Preparation and Readiness (Proposed)

Community Orientation & Introductory Workshop

To increase awareness in the community we propose to prepare and deliver a community orientation workshop, 3-4 hours in length, to 30+ key community leaders invited by the Steering Team. This workshop would include:

- Background and overview of HTC framework
- Overview of KHPI work to date
- Implementation roadmap
- Community interest and readiness assessment (summarize)
- Review of community benefits
- Review of expectations of community commitment

Steering Team Interviews

To understand the Steering Team and to help prepare for Phase I, we propose to facilitate personal, individual interviews with each team member to explore personal readiness, consider individual level of commitment, motivation and talent; identify individual contributions, perceived barriers and desired outcomes. (Summarize themes across Steering Team.)

Organizational Presentations by Steering Team (tentative)

Depending on outcome of the community orientation and steering team interviews, we propose to prepare a short presentation for the Steering Team to present to community organizations and capture community reaction and feedback. (Compile results)

Reconvene Steering Team

Reconvene Steering Team to review a summary of the organizational presentation reactions and feedback, community interest and readiness assessment and key themes from the interviews. Go deeper with readiness criteria, review community qualifications, address barriers and facilitate a decision about proceeding with Phase I.

Community Readiness for Systemic Change

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What is Community Readiness?

Readiness may be defined in different ways. It might mean looking at an applicant's fit with a particular program. Or it could mean an assessment of a community's ability to act and sustain a community change strategy.

What are the holistic dimensions of community that offer a forecast of success in launching a sustainable pathway to community wealth creation? What is the baseline of knowledge, skills and attitudes of community leaders that might help ensure success? How can a rural community practitioner or a small town leader gauge the readiness of a community to move forward to change and improve? What might an estimation of community readiness mean to the design of an improvement effort? How can readiness be tied to evaluation in order to ensure progress?

Readiness Assessment

Assessments of readiness are often tied to specific topics or issues. Many community readiness tools are available to public health practitioners as first steps in creating prevention programs. Alcohol and tobacco use, illegal drug use and healthy eating habits are examples of these kinds of readiness tools.

Community structures and procedures also can be assessed in terms of completeness or readiness for change. The Civic Index from the National Civic League is a longstanding example. The *20 Clues to Rural Community Survival*, first published by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development in 1987 and updated in 2008, were synthesized from characteristics found commonly in thriving small towns. Communities can use the 20 Clues to identify their own readiness for building community capacity and sustaining economic vitality.

Readiness for entrepreneurship development also has been a focus of readiness assessments. For example, with support from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Heartland Center created an assessment tool that is focused on rating a community's support for entrepreneurs. Among the criteria considered: "Entrepreneurship education is part of the K-12 curriculum" and "Networks link entrepreneurs to various types of resources."

The RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship has developed its own assessment tool with six community readiness factors, including "experience with services such as networking, mentoring micro-lending, training and counseling." RUPRI also stresses that community readiness includes a willingness to look beyond the community's borders to create partnerships with other communities and regional resource agencies.

Community Readiness Models

Earlier this year, the Orton Family Foundation asked the Heartland Center to conduct a search for community readiness assessment tools and to study them in order to inform the second round of community selections for the Foundation's Heart & Soul planning process. With the help of the Department of Sociology at Iowa State University, the Heartland Center collected and analyzed 29 assessment models from organizations throughout the United States and Canada. Each model was considered according to these elements: Dimensions of Readiness, Methodology, Scoring and Results, Empirical Support, Possible Advantages and Possible Disadvantages.

Among the 29 models, two, especially, stood out: *Readiness for Engagement: A Qualitative Investigation of Community Social Capacity*, published in 2008 by University of Minnesota Extension, and the *Community Matrix Tool*, published in 2006 by the Centre for Innovative & Entrepreneurial Leadership (CIEL).

The University of Minnesota Model

The University of Minnesota approach to community readiness stressed that:

- Community readiness is closely related to social capacity. It requires strong relationships, problem-solving and group decision-making skills, and an ability to collaborate and get work done.
- Community readiness incorporates aspects of bonding, bridging and linking networks.
- Community readiness is best thought of as a continuum. Some communities are "more" ready, while some are "less" ready. Awareness of issues relating to demographic, economic or political change is an important stage in the readiness continuum.

The university designed a structured interview tool based on Wilder Research's *Twenty-eight Factors for Successful Community Building*, which were derived from a meta-analysis of capacity-building literature pertaining to three categories of community capacity: Social and physical characteristics of communities, characteristics of community leaders and characteristics of the community-building process.

The Minnesota study produced a Suggested Readiness Assessment with 20 statements related to these four characteristics:

- Characteristics of Bonding and Bridging Networks
- Characteristics of Linking Networks
- Characteristics of Leadership Energy
- Characteristics of the Community

As an example, a statement related to Characteristic No. 1 is: *Residents with different backgrounds trust each other and have strong relationships*. Another, from Characteristic No. 2: *Community members feel comfortable voicing their opinions to community leaders*. From No. 3, *Community leaders are able to move beyond the past and look toward the future of this community*. From No. 4: *There are issues in this community that are serious enough to require a community-building initiative*.

Centre for Innovative & Entrepreneurial Leadership Model

CIEL's Communities Matrix Questionnaire takes a similar approach, with 61 statements in seven categories of community readiness:

1. Connections and Cooperation
2. Vitality
3. Inclusivity and Community Values
4. Leadership
5. Strategic Capacity
6. Sustainability
7. Community Entrepreneurship

The statements, which respondents are asked to rank from Completely Agree to Completely Disagree or Don't Know, are similar to those found in the Minnesota instrument. Examples include:

- Networks exist among diverse organizations and groups.
- People feel safe to speak their mind about issues in the community.
- For newcomers to the community, there are meaningful opportunities to get involved and make a difference.
- When community leaders make decisions on behalf of the community, the members know how the decision was made, by whom and why.
- There is an up-to-date community vision or plan.
- For leaders or key community members, thought is being given to replace them if the need arises (for example, retirement).
- Innovation is valued and recognized in the community.

CIEL's instrument also includes a small number of open-ended questions, such as "Name 3 words, phrases or adjectives that best describe your community."

The Orton Family Foundation has concluded that there are several factors that repeat in a number of the tools that were collected and analyzed by the Heartland Center. Among them:

- Social capital (bonding, bridging and linking networks, community norms/trust) that helps the community come together to achieve common goals.
- Leadership that is inclusive in its decision-making processes, including the consideration of future generations, is open to new ideas and supports development of new leaders.
- A culture that celebrates and supports community (e.g., places to gather, community events, volunteerism).
- Baseline capacity including physical infrastructure and community services to support a community's vision.

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Orton also concludes, similar to the Minnesota study, that it is important to consider readiness on a continuum and to use that continuum to help communities assess what kind of planning process they are willing to undertake.

Community Readiness and Policy

The relevance of these studies to policy is this: Policy makers, whether are in the public, private or nonprofit sectors, should consider readiness community by community, to make sure that any assistance offered or provided is consistent with the community's current capacity. Further, if capacity is lacking, some portion of that assistance—perhaps a considerable portion—should start with capacity building that is designed to help the community experience and eventually sustain a community improvement agenda that fulfills the community's own aspirations and produces recognizable and meaningful results.

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The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship's vision for rural America is one of vibrant communities and regions that embrace entrepreneurship, that find new sources of competitive advantage in their inherent assets, and that invest in a new more sustainable future for both present and future generations. The Center's mission is to help our local, regional and state partners achieve this future by connecting economic development practitioners and policy makers to the resources needed to energize entrepreneurs and implement entrepreneurship as a core economic development strategy.

To learn more about the Center's history and program areas, go to www.energizingentrepreneurs.org.

The Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) provided founding support to create the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in 2001. RUPRI's mission is to provide independent analysis and information on the challenges, needs, and opportunities facing rural people and places. The work of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, along with other centers and collaborations, helps RUPRI achieve this mission. To learn more about RUPRI, visit www.rupri.org.