

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 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." The Center 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:

1. 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.
2. Community readiness incorporates aspects of bonding, bridging and linking networks.
3. 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:

1. Characteristics of Bonding and Bridging Networks
2. Characteristics of Linking Networks
3. Characteristics of Leadership Energy
4. 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.

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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- **Community Development Philanthropy:** Providing research and community engagement strategies that help communities build philanthropic capacity and create development resources now and in the future.
- **Youth Engagement:** Providing tools and a framework for communities to engage young people now and to bring them home in the future.
- **Measurement Research Policy:** Providing the tools to help communities define development goals, measure success and improve outcomes.
- **Entrepreneurial Communities:** Providing a roadmap for communities to design and deliver entrepreneur-focused economic development strategies that work.

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