

Weathering the Pandemic in Ord, Nebraska

How a Well-functioning Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Came Back Better

David L. Iaquinta, Ph.D.

There are many lessons in *Weathering the Pandemic* about individual and community resilience. This brief introduction does not attempt to summarize the detailed information contained in the scholarly work. Rather it is a journalistic summary of the who, what when, where, and why. We hope to pique your curiosity and motivate you to dig into the rich tapestry created by the voices of Ord as they navigated the pandemic. There is a clear picture of what a well-functioning entrepreneurial ecosystem looks like. Best, there is a distinctly human scale to the narrative that allows you to see yourself as the actor and agency of community change.

Structure of the Paper

We did not choose to collect and curate the story of Ord weathering the pandemic because it is a clear recipe for all other communities. We do find that there are clear lessons that other communities can see as within their own capacity to apply creatively given their own unique circumstances. We focus the story around four conceptual pairs:

- Shared Interests **versus** Positions,
- Individual **and** Collective,
- Public **and** Private,
- Crisis as Catastrophe **versus** Change Point.

And two prevailing system contexts:

- A *nanopolitan* place, and
- A capacities framework [as described in the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) which identifies various capitals such as human, social and economic].

Each of the above points is illustrated by the many voices of Ord which demonstrate the diverse personal dimensions of experience within the community. Our hope is that others will see themselves and their communities within these stories and be motivated to take action to create a new future for themselves and their communities.

Who?

Everyone has a story to tell and so do places. Stories are essentially narratives constructed from the historical evidence and experience of a place, and from the personal reflections of the people inhabiting the place. Often, such stories are told from the viewpoint of a single individual or from the perspective of an “omniscient” observer. In *Weathering the Pandemic*, we rely on many individual voices of Ord in

Valley County, organized in an analytic framework supplied by the observer, and built on a longer economic analysis of the place. The voices reflect entrepreneurs, civic leaders, and institutional custodians. They are simultaneously personal and professional. They inform us not by pontification or elaborated policy advocacy. Rather they simply reflect the individual agency involved in coping with crisis as human actors charged with meeting personal needs, business solvency and community well-being. They illustrate an ecosystem in action, animated by individual decisions within a context of collective concern.

What?

This is a story about Ord and Valley County, but it serves as a case study of resilience in the face of crisis. While unique to Ord, it provides insights into both how other communities have weathered tough times and how yet other communities might shorten the time frame of transitioning to success. Like the rest of the world, Ord was blind-sided by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within a matter of weeks, the pandemic forced business shutdowns, derailed individual plans and daily routines, created emotional dislocation, spawned rising fears of danger and mortality, heightened community friction, and left all with varying degrees of isolation.

While Ord had experienced other crises in its past, nothing had truly prepared the community for the speed with which the pandemic's effects reverberated through all segments of the community. While the pandemic was a single cause influencer not unlike the agricultural crisis or hospital crisis of earlier periods, it moved much more rapidly and with a far broader range of divergent impact on every segment of the community. "*How could we weather the pandemic?*" became an existential question permeating every individual, every household, and every institution – every day. The pandemic also differed from earlier crises in that its influence created a constantly changing landscape for action based on changing medical directives, emerging knowledge about the virus, and shifting public attitudes about what constitutes evidence and how to respond.

Finally, the pandemic manifested locally but within a broader statewide and national context of shifting attitudes and powerful countervailing forces. There was no coherent and sustained policy context giving consistent direction, precisely due to the emerging nature of evidence, the politicization of issues along intentionally divisive lines, and the growing wedge politics of the day. In short, this was a novel crisis and while Ord had weathered others in its history, this could be the one that would finally "break them." It didn't. [Why?](#)

When?

The team researching *Weathering the Pandemic* had been working with Ord for over 25 years, beginning in the 1980s. The economic analysis reached back even further to the origins of Ord and the settlement of this region of the Great Plains. Beginning in the summer of 2019, the team began an in-depth collection of stories focusing on entrepreneurs in Ord and Valley County. The purpose was to better understand the rudiments of a dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem. These stories were collected and

curated into an extensive literature. Ultimately, a teaching website has been created that can be used by local individuals, community development practitioners, and whole communities to see how they too can reverse local negative growth trajectories and plot a path to stability and dynamic, sustainable growth.

COVID-19 entered the scene in Ord in January 2020. First, as a vague worldwide concern about other places. Within weeks it blossomed into a crisis as state-mandated shutdowns shuttered all normal life for businesses, institutions, and individuals alike. For three months, until summer 2020, the medically necessary shutdown wreaked havoc. In summer 2020 things opened for Ord and created a resurgence of opportunity for some businesses. Others were left behind. Meanwhile, medical professionals and mental health professionals saw their situations in starkly different terms. The unknowns of the virus combined with the divergent public opinions and professional fatigue led to increasing personal challenges. As one mental health provider said, *“We realized we were in it. We were not just treating the mental health concerns of our patients. We were experiencing the same things ourselves.”*

By the end of summer 2021 the resurgence of business experienced by some local enterprises began to subside. The flow of people who had come to the area to escape the constraints imposed in cities and other states subsided. Winter of 2021 left everyone in limbo with respect to the future. The pandemic continued with recurring intensity, keeping conditions unstable and emotions simmering. Going into 2022, national politics, amped up by media coverage, siloed information channels, and emerging realities of the national election, heightened politicization and polarization throughout the country. Attention shifted increasingly from the pandemic itself to opinions about vaccination and protective protocols. From the voices of Ord we learn how Ord dealt with these as internal community challenges.

Where?

With a population of slightly more than 2000, Ord is clearly not “urban.” But it is equally important not to frame the understanding of Ord as “rural.” Rather Ord fits into a category of place we would call *periurban* in the international literature, and even more specifically as *village periurban* in the elaborated periurban typology developed by Iaquinata and Drescher (1999). Yet even this characterization falls a bit short of understanding contemporary Ord--Valley County.

Therefore, we classify contemporary Ord--Valley County as *nanopolitan*. Such places punch far above their weight class (population level) in terms of economic health, social stability, and success. They are dynamic, adaptive, and proactive. They defy easy stereotypes of *rural* that limit self-perception, and they resist centrifugal forces that often fractionate urban places. This is the context for understanding Ord--Valley County. It involves reciprocal exchanges of goods, services, and concern. It is based on shared interests and mutual well-being. Whether the issue is the distribution to the entire region of low interest loans derived from their one-percent local sales tax revenue, or support in times of crisis, their destinies are linked. People have internalized this understanding in a way that animates their daily actions.

The pandemic story of Ord--Valley County operates at multiple levels and in two domains. Individuals, institutions, organizations, and the community were all affected in various ways. The pandemic story is a multiplicity of stories about the responses of the community, the schools, medical facilities, businesses, children, parents, entrepreneurs, public officials, and institutional custodians. In normal times, this rich fabric of interlaced individual and institutional concern often is poorly recognized as a single ecosystem by its participants. In the pandemic, there was great potential to collapse the understanding of community in the face of individual needs and concerns.

Public institutions and administration, and private enterprise compose the two domains within a community. Frequently these are enmeshed in mutual distrust and a perception of incompatible objectives. Both sectors were challenged mightily in Ord as they were in other communities. But Ord had a hard-won base of trust to depend on. The private sector already understood that it needed to operate as an ecosystem to thrive. This awareness grew out of a long history of trust building, mentoring, creative financial structures, and individual agency. The public sector already saw its profit-making role as tied to public well-being. During the pandemic, the public sector found new ways to integrate public well-being with private sector needs. School leaders, public officials, hospital administrators, and others saw that solving their concerns rested not just on their students, constituents, and patients, but on the local economic engine of community capital accumulation and success.

Like mob hysteria in a natural disaster, collectives reach a threshold of response where the outcome rests on the knife edge of panic and devolution (system collapse), or on galvanized action. Ord chose to be Ord and not just a collection of disparate parts responding only to individual needs and wants. The elementary school principal phrased this approach as "*Ording them up*" when referring to maintaining the well-being of the children in his care. The people of Ord reached into their core and pivoted again and again, working to maintain their collective identity by using the social, economic, and human capital they had accumulated in earlier crises. They relied on their trust in each other and lifted themselves by their bootstraps with creative thinking, organization, and action. They weathered the pandemic through its first two years. They were well positioned not only to continue weathering the pandemic as the Omicron variant hit and continued uncertainty unfolded, but also to evolve and thrive. They never lost their intentional commitment to shared interest, their agency, or their *imaginuity*.

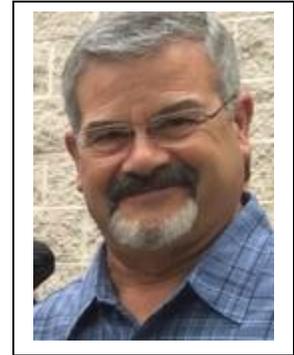
Why?

It is easy to sit outside a situation and attribute cause and effect without understanding how the actors within bring about success. Too often success is misattributed to a single individual, action, or circumstance without fully grasping the systemic nature that matriculates these specifics into success. Ord is an example where culture, structure and agency have become normalized and routine so that the system continually rebalances itself in the face of shocks-- small or large. People pay attention to the details without losing their shared respect for others and the whole. People give with an understanding that they will ultimately benefit even when it is not clear in the moment how that will happen. They are

not Pollyannas, but reasonable folks who can disagree without vilifying. They are a community that sees economic and social well-being as linked necessities for mutual survival. They are more than *just neighbors*; they behave as *real neighbors*.

Questions about Dr. Iaquina's paper...

David L. Iaquina, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology
Nebraska Wesleyan University
402.465.2426
dli@nebrwesleyan.edu



Questions and Information

For more information on the Ord Story Collection...

Don Macke – Senior Vice President
e2 – Entrepreneurial Ecosystems – Hosted by NetWork Kansas
Office 402.323.7336 – Cell 402.770.4987
don@e2mail.org – www.energizingentrepreneurs.org