

Background

Why are some rural communities coping with fundamental restructuring when others seem to have surrendered to crisis?

With that question in mind, the Heartland Center for Leadership Development undertook in-depth case studies of five rural Nebraska communities with populations ranging 450 to 6,000. The communities were selected from among 20 small towns that were identified as surviving the economic trends stemming from the agricultural crisis of the 1980s.

The communities were selected by the Nebraska Governor's Policy Research Office, which sponsored the studies. They were selected based on a review of:

- ◆ census data
- ◆ labor statistics
- ◆ geographic representation
- ◆ population size
- ◆ nominations from people knowledgeable about the state.

Since the original studies were undertaken, 15 other thriving small towns and two Indian reservations in 12 states have been the subject of similar research. The case studies were developed to:

- ◆ provide an alternative, positive perspective on rural communities that might contrast with the "dying community" image that has become commonly accepted.
- ◆ provide information to policy makers for potential use in guiding programs of local and state governments.
- ◆ provide an information base for leadership development activities aimed at leaders in rural communities.

Method of Study

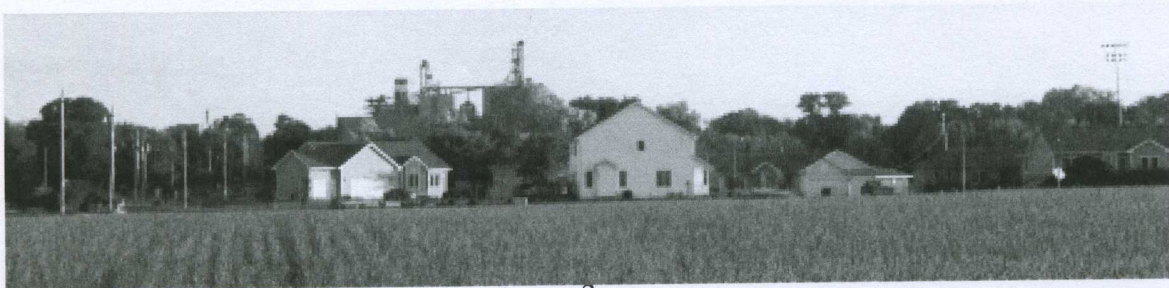
After gathering background information on each community from available state, federal and private information resource banks, community leaders were identified and contacted. In each community, both positional leaders and reputational leaders were interviewed (in person or by phone) and each was asked a series of questions under four topics: Quality of Life, The Economy, Leadership, and Planning for the Future. Information gathered in those interviews was combined with impressions gained from community visits and other informational materials, analyzed for characteristics in common across all communities, and used as background to write community profiles.

Conclusions

A synthesis of insights into community success led to development of a series of possible "clues to rural community survival," and these clues were analyzed and re-analyzed following each community study. Finally, the clues were formalized into the list of ***20 Clues to Rural Community Survival*** included in these materials.

20 Clues to Rural Community Survival

- 1. Evidence of Community Pride**
- 2. Emphasis on Quality in Business and Community Life**
- 3. Willingness to Invest in the Future**
- 4. Participatory Approach to Community Decision-Making**
- 5. Cooperative Community Spirit**
- 6. Realistic Appraisal of Future Opportunities**
- 7. Awareness of Competitive Positioning**
- 8. Knowledge of the Physical Environment**
- 9. Active Economic Development Program**
- 10. Deliberate Transition of Power to a Younger Generation of Leaders**
- 11. Celebration of Diversity in Leadership**
- 12. Strong Belief in and Support of Education**
- 13. Problem-Solving Approach to Providing Health Care**
- 14. Strong Multi-Generational Family Orientation**
- 15. Strong Presence of Traditional Institutions that are Integral to Community Life**
- 16. Attention to Sound and Well-Maintained Infrastructure**
- 17. Careful Use of Fiscal Resources**
- 18. Sophisticated Use of Technology Resources**
- 19. Willingness to Seek Help from the Outside**
- 20. Conviction that, in the Long Run, You Have to Do It Yourself**



20 Clues to Rural Community Survival

An Annotated List

1. Evidence of Community Pride

Successful communities are often showplaces of community care and attention, with neatly trimmed yards, public gardens, and well-kept public parks. But pride also shows up in other ways, especially in community festivals and events that give residents the chance to celebrate their community, its history and heritage.

2. Emphasis on Quality in Business and Community Life

People in successful communities believe that something worth doing is worth doing right. Facilities are built to last, and so are homes and other improvements. Newer brick additions to schools are common, for example, and businesses are built or expanded with attention to design and construction detail.

3. Willingness to Invest in the Future

Some of the brick and mortar investments are most apparent, but these communities also invest in their future in other ways. Residents invest time and energy in community improvement projects, and they concern themselves with how what they are doing today will impact on the lives of their children and grandchildren in the future.

4. Participatory Approach to Community Decision Making

Authoritarian models don't seem to exist in these communities, and power is deliberately shared. People still know who you need on your side to get something done, but even the most powerful of opinion leaders seem to work through the systems—formal as well as informal—to build consensus for what they want to do.

5. Cooperative Community Spirit

Successful rural communities devote more attention to cooperative activities than to fighting over what should be done and by whom. The stress is on working together toward a common goal and the focus is on positive results. They may spend a long time making a decision, and there may be disagreements along the way, but eventually, as one small town leader put it, "stuff does get done."

6. Realistic Appraisal of Future Opportunities

Many of the communities have already learned an important strategic lesson, namely building on your assets and minimizing your weaknesses. Few small communities believe that they are likely to land a giant industry. Many of them say they wouldn't want one if it came along, fearing too much dependence on one employer would be dangerous. The successful communities know that a more realistic approach considers the community and the region as the context for future opportunities.

7. Awareness of Competitive Positioning

The thriving communities know who the competition is and so do the businesses. Everyone tries to stress local loyalty as a way to help, but many businesses also keep tabs on their competitors in other towns—they don't want any of the hometown folks to have an excuse to go elsewhere. This is an area in which the recognition of community assets—people, associations and institutions—is vitally important. The comparison of one town to another is a significant means to spur improvements.

8. Knowledge of the Physical Environment

Importance of location is underscored continuously in local decision-making, as business and civic leaders picture their community in relation to others. Beyond location, however, communities must also be familiar with what they have locally. For example, the issue of preservation and protection of natural resources must be balanced with development options. Communities that manage this balance have a long-term approach to both environmental preservation and economic development.

9. Active Economic Development Program

An organized and active approach to economic development is common in successful communities. This type of approach depends on public and private sector resources working hand in hand. Private economic development corporations are common, either as a subcommittee or an outgrowth of a Chamber of Commerce or commercial club. However, it's clear that the most successful towns emphasize retaining and expanding existing businesses as well as trying to develop new businesses. This is a "gardening not hunting" model of economic development.

10. Deliberate Transition of Power to a Younger Generation of Leaders

Young leadership is more the rule than the exception in thriving rural communities. In many cases, these young people grew up in town and decided to stay or returned later to raise a family. In just as many situations, they are people who have decided to make a life in the community even though they grew up elsewhere. However, it's typical in a successful community to have a formal or informal means for established leaders to bring new recruits into public service.

11. Celebration of Diversity in Leadership

Women, minorities, youth and newcomers are encouraged and welcomed into leadership circles where their ideas are treated as opportunities for exploration of new ways to improve community-building, not as threats to the “way it’s always been done.” The community welcomes new people, new ideas and new ways of doing things as it moves along a strategic path to greater success and enhanced sustainability.

12. Strong Belief in and Support of Education

Good schools are a point of pride as well as a stable employment force, and rural community leaders are very much aware of their school’s importance. However, this characteristic goes beyond the K-12 system to include an approach to life long learning that puts education at the center of many community activities. Whether adult education is targeted at skills and job performance or hobbies and recreation, the successful community makes the most of education at all levels.

13. Problem-Solving Approach to Providing Health Care

Local health care is a common concern in rural communities, but strategies for delivery vary, depending on community needs. While one community may decide that keeping a doctor in residence should be the priority, another may choose to train as many people as possible as EMTs or to use telecommunications to augment a clinic. The point here is the variety of solutions to a common problem.

14. Strong Multi-Generational Family Orientation

These are family-oriented communities, with activities often built around family needs and ties. But the definition of family is broad, and it includes younger as well as older generations and people new to the community. A typical example of this attitude is the provision of child care for community town hall meetings, thus allowing young families to attend.

15. Strong Presence of Traditional Institutions that are Integral to Community Life

Churches are often the strongest force in this characteristic, but other types of community institutions such as newspapers and radio stations, hospitals and schools fill this role also. Service clubs retain a strong influence in social activities as well as in community improvement efforts.

16. Attention to Sound and Well-Maintained Infrastructure

Thriving rural communities understand the importance of physical infrastructures—such as streets, sidewalks, water systems, sewage treatment plants—and efforts are made to maintain and improve them. In these communities, a clean-up day includes public parks and playgrounds, business owners keep sidewalks repaired, and volunteer labor and donated materials go a long way to maintaining public buildings.

17. Careful Use of Fiscal Resources

Frugality is a way of life in successful small communities, and expenditures are made carefully. People aren't afraid to spend money, when they believe they should, and then, typically, things are built to last. But neither are they spendthrifts. Expenditures are often seen as investments in the future of the community.

18. Sophisticated Use of Technology Resources

Rural community leaders are knowledgeable about their communities beyond the information base available in the community. In an increasing number of places, high-speed Internet access is revolutionizing all types of information access. Today, the applications of technology are so widespread in business, health care, education and recreation that the capacity of small towns to make use of these resources seems to be a strong indicator of success.

19. Willingness to Seek Help from the Outside

There's little reluctance to seek help from outside resources. These communities understand the system of accessing resources, ranging from grants for infrastructure improvement to expertise about human service programs. Competing for such resources successfully is a source of pride for local leaders.

20. Conviction that, in the Long Run, You Have to Do It Yourself

Although outside help is sought when appropriate, it is nevertheless true that thriving small towns believe that their destiny is in their own hands. They are not waiting for some outsider to save them, nor do they believe that they can sit and wait for things to get better. Making a hometown a good place to live for a long time to come is a proactive assignment, and these local leaders know that no one will take care of a town as well as the people who live there.

Community Strengths and Opportunities

The following is a list of 20 characteristics found among thriving communities, based on research conducted by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development. The Heartland Center found that thriving communities will tend to possess a variety of these characteristics, but not all 20 characteristics. Review these characteristics. Based on your community, rate each characteristic as a (1) agree, (2) neutral or (3), disagree.

Characteristic		1	2	3
1.	Evidence of community pride			
2.	Emphasis on quality in business and community life			
3.	Willingness to invest in the future			
4.	Participatory approach to community decision-making			
5.	Cooperative community spirit			
6.	Realistic appraisal of future opportunities			
7.	Awareness of competitive positioning			
8.	Knowledge of the physical environment			
9.	Active economic development program			
10.	Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders			
11.	Celebration of diversity in leadership			
12.	Strong belief in and support of education			
13.	Problem-solving approach to providing health care			
14.	Strong multi-generational family orientation			
15.	Strong presence of traditional institutions that are integral to community life			
16.	Attention to sound and well-maintained infrastructure			
17.	Careful use of fiscal resources			
18.	Sophisticated use of technology resources			
19.	Willingness to seek help from the outside			
20.	Conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself			