

Project Navigator: Implementing a Civic Engagement Process to Fight Poverty in Four Mississippi Counties

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Turning the Tide on Poverty (Tide) was modeled after Horizons, a successful poverty-fighting initiative implemented in the northwestern U.S. Tide involves community members in seeking grassroots solutions to poverty. The process begins with a five-week study circles process where community members engage in dialogue and exploration before implementing a community action plan. Tide was piloted in 2008 in the Southeast U.S. at eight sites in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. The Tide process was adapted for Project Navigator, funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission, because it deals with building civic capacity in poverty-stricken communities (Beaulieu & Welborn, 2012). The four Project Navigator counties were chosen because of their rurality (USDA ERS Urban Influence Codes 8-10) and their high poverty rates (21.2%-36.5%).

Purpose

The purpose of the project was to increase civic engagement, build capacity, empower communities, and help local groups take ownership in their community goals. The theoretical foundation used for this research was Flora and Flora's (2004) community capital theory. According to this theory, communities are more successful with economic development and sustainability when they are fluent in seven types of capital - natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built.

Methodology

A three-pronged approach to gather data was used. First, eight to ten key informants within each of the counties were interviewed in 2011 before the project began. Questions revolved around decision-making structures, efforts to involve citizens, and the role of Extension within this context. Follow-up key informant interviews were conducted in August 2012. The second source of data came from focus groups of citizens within each county. These focus groups were held during the same time frames as the key informant interviews, pre and post. The same questions were used in the focus groups. The third source of data came from the study circle participants. During a community kick-off event, attendees were asked to complete a pre-survey to explore their current beliefs and actions related to civic involvement. At the close of the process, a post survey was administered to Tide participants, focus group participants, and key informants.

Preliminary Results

A variety of measures were employed to determine the extent to which individuals become involved in the community process, feel empowered to contribute, and continue to take an active role in community improvement efforts. Qualitative analysis of the data revealed several themes similar to year one pilot data.

Sustainability. Researchers measured emergence of sustainable community action by looking at the success of the community initiatives themselves. Data was gathered on the (1) number of community projects initiated as a result of Tide, (2) number of projects completed to date, (3) number of projects still in process, and (4) likelihood of long-term sustainability of one or more of the initiatives begun. The communities varied widely in the sustainability of the Tide action team projects.

Perceptions of leadership. As in the year one pilot sites, citizens in the Project Navigator sites reported that the majority of community decisions were made by elected officials in a "top-down" leadership style. This perception really did not change from pre- to post-interviews.

Community climate. The community climate theme seeks to describe how citizens viewed their community in more general terms, in either positive or negative expressions (Beaulieu & Welborn, 2012).

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All counties participating in this project were experiencing poverty rates of 20% or more, however, the way citizens viewed their communities differed ranging from apathy and hopelessness to optimism and enthusiasm.

Race relations. Race relations in the communities varied from polarized to united and working together.

Local champion. The idea behind a local champion was that a clear leader emerged in some communities who demonstrated enthusiasm for the Tide process, encouraged others to become involved, and/or embraced a particular action idea (Beaulieu & Welborn, 2012). In three of the four counties, community champions emerged. In all three cases, these were not necessarily one individual, but groups of individuals who were passionate about Tide and the action team projects. It is quite likely the presence of community champions will be a predictor of success for the Tide process.

References

- Beaulieu, B., & Welborn, R. (2012, February). *Turning the tide on poverty: Measuring and predicting civic engagement success*. Final Report to the Kettering Foundation.
- Flora, C. B., & Flora, J. A. (2004). *Rural communities: Legacy and change (2nd ed.)*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.