

Making the Case for Youth Engagement

By: Craig Schroeder

Introduction

Stemming the outflow of young people from America's countryside has been a topic of great concern to rural leaders for decades. Many recognize that ultimately the renewal and vitality of rural America relies on attracting more young adults and families to rural communities. An examination of over 40,000 rural junior high and high school students' perspectives on their hometowns and their futures, gathered from across the United States, suggests that young people themselves may provide tangible answers.



In short, many youth would prefer to stay or return to their hometowns, especially if there are viable career opportunities available. Strong ties to family and growing up in rural America are powerful draws, and many youth believe that their home communities would be a great place to raise their own families.

However, the opportunities the data reveals can only be realized if action is taken to help more youth confidently see their hometowns as places where quality economic opportunities are available, in addition to the strong family and community ties. This research points to some practicable steps that can be taken to put youth attraction strategies in place. This paper provides background on the research, highlights

some notable results, and outlines steps for building an effective youth engagement strategy.

Background

For the past decade, surveys completed by junior high and high school youth across the country have yielded startling results that highlight how broadly communities are underestimating their youths' interest in their hometowns and building their future there. Across the 40,000 plus youth surveyed, half (50%) picture themselves live in their hometown in the future if quality career

opportunities are available. When spouses and children are factored in, this becomes an even more substantial opportunity.

Rural communities have persistently, if unintentionally, overlooked involving youth in the shaping of their futures, perhaps due to a belief that youth want to leave and never return, and that leaving is a better option for them to pursue. In the absence of knowledge about youth aspirations and definitive strategies to engage young people, rural communities miss opportunities for young people to learn about local career and business opportunities, and to involve them in community projects that deepen their ownership in the future of their hometowns.

Added to this, are challenges facing many rural businesses in finding skilled workforce and qualified people to acquire their businesses when they retire. Often the response of rural youth when considering a future in their hometown is, “there are no jobs here!” Meanwhile, rural businesses say one of their greatest challenges is, “there are not enough young people to fill our jobs openings.”

The Survey. *The survey instrument is a web-based tool, administered before communities undertake new youth engagement activities. It explores students’ plans for their future with a focus on their perspectives about their hometowns, education and career interests, and motivators for living in their hometown in the future and for causing them to see themselves living elsewhere. Students complete the surveys individually in classroom settings with teacher supervision.*



Survey Results

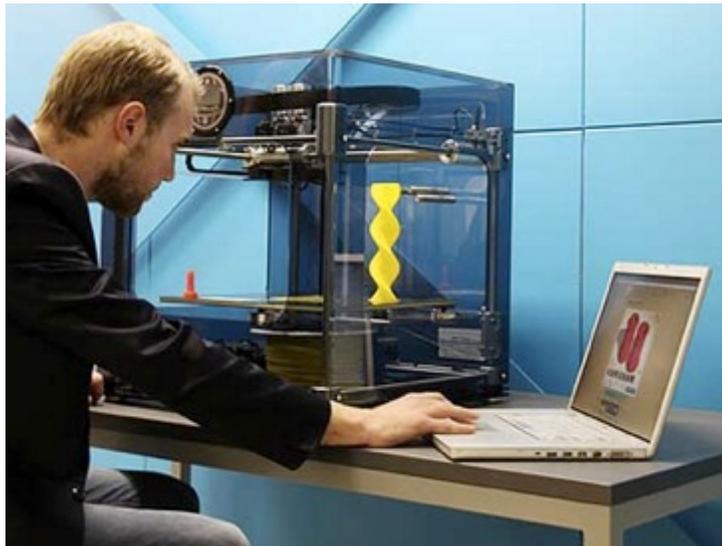
The manner for conducting the survey ensures that many responses are received in quality-controlled classroom environments. In most cases, over 80% of the student body between 7th and 12th grades participate in the survey. The 40,000 plus youth responding to date have some valuable thoughts to share –

this despite the fact that 64% of survey participants indicate that no adult has ever asked for their views on how to make their community a more attractive place for young people.

Of first importance, 46% of the young people rated their communities as an above average to excellent place to live. However, the big “if” expressed by youth is whether quality career opportunities are to be available in their hometown communities. The current perception shared by many youth is that greater chances for economic and professional success exist beyond the bounds of the rural regions they call home.

Why would youth like to stay in their hometown communities? Family ties and a good place to raise a family are the two top motivators for survey participants to stay or return to their communities. These reasons signify strong emotional ties to the places where the youth grew up, and community leaders should recognize this strong social capital as valuable in revitalizing communities through the “attraction” of their youth to stay or return home in the future.

A number of young people also expressed entrepreneurial aspirations that could be realized right at home. Indeed, entrepreneurial young people can be a rural community’s best opportunity for economic growth and wealth creation. This is especially true when entrepreneurship is linked to major economic sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and information technology. A series of responses regarding entrepreneurship



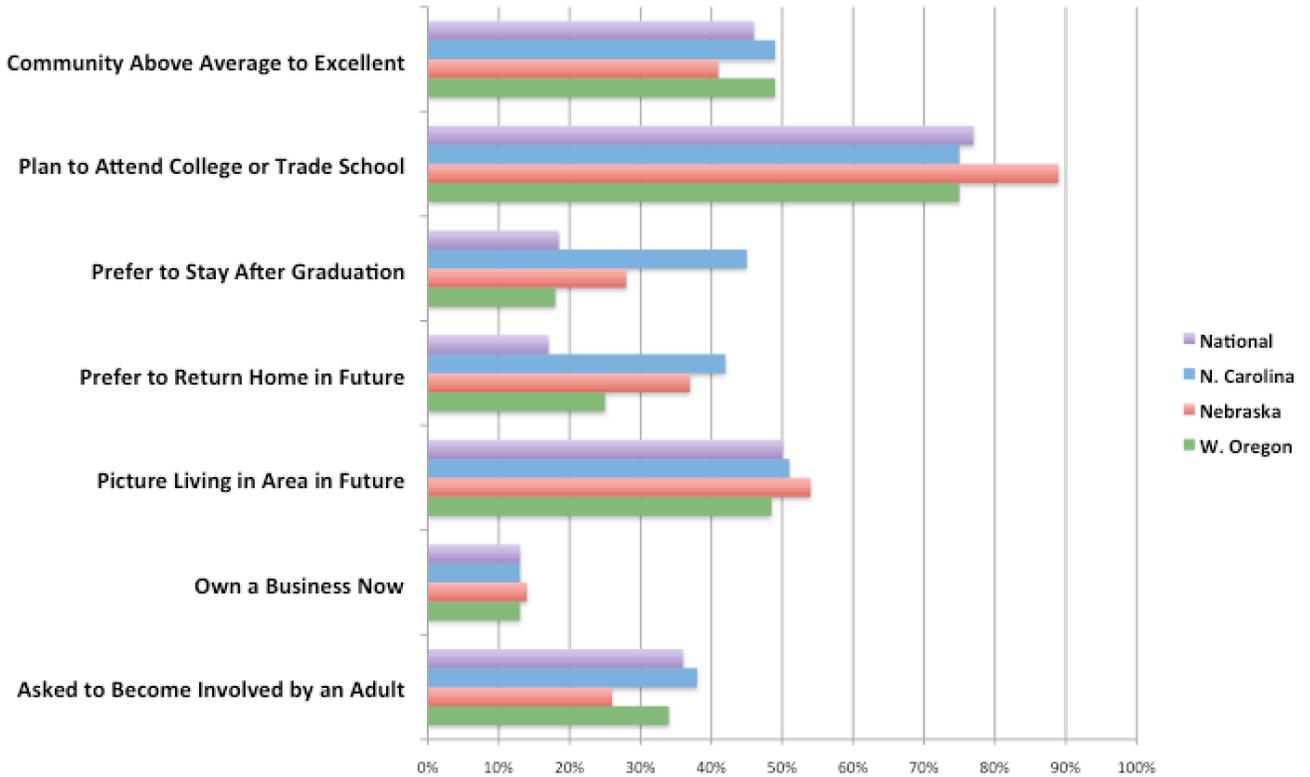
shows a significant amount of interest in business ownership. Forty-two percent (42%) of those surveyed stated interest in owning a business in the future, and 13% of youth respondents already own businesses. Added to this, 42% of all respondents said that they would like to take an entrepreneurship class linked with hands-on learning experiences with successful business mentors in their community.

In the Table on the next page, teenage responses to several key questions on the survey are illustrated. This particular bar chart compares the overall national responses with survey results from three different rural environments, North Carolina, Nebraska and western Oregon.

Table – National Youth Survey Results Compared to Rural NC, NE and OR Youth

Youth Survey Highlights

Over 40,000 Youth from Across the United States



From Findings to Action

The findings of these surveys call to community leaders to build upon the potential and energy of young people. Their willingness to stay or return to their communities, their dedication to acquiring higher education and higher quality jobs, and their notable interest in entrepreneurship can add up to a formula for success with the right spectrum of activities. It is the responsibility of community leaders working with educators and young people to design strategies and enact plans that hone this potential into a more promising future.

Rural communities can take steps immediately to begin to cultivate the full potential of their youthful population. There are two key places in which to begin the work.

Getting to know your young people

It is time to begin assessing the attitudes and priorities of youth in rural communities. Oftentimes, adults make the mistake of thinking that they can represent the interests of young people, and know what they want and need. Communities that are serious about youth engagement should consider ways to get to know their youth and involve them as active young leaders and citizens.

A survey is a great way to start the conversation, and to gain a better understanding of what young people value. Holding focus groups with youth from a variety of perspectives is another method. In one community, youth took up the banner to discuss what they wanted in their town and how they could help make it better. They began communications through FaceBook and eventually started meeting in person to create a groundswell of activities in their hometown.

Survey and focus group results should be shared broadly among community leaders, both elected officials and informal leadership; to demonstrate the potential impact that involving youth can hold for the community. The use of media – newspapers, radio, TV, and social media – to broadcast youth perspectives and priorities can generate excitement and the desire to engage. Better yet, ask youth to present the assessment results in their own words to the media and in-person with community leaders.

Community asset mapping and partnerships among educators, youth organizations and community leaders are two other key tools in leveraging the resources of a community to support youth engagement. In fact, in some instances, it is beneficial to move ahead with asset mapping and organizing at the same time or even before communities consider survey work to gain buy-in from local leaders and citizens. Mapping the community's assets, especially with an eye to career interests expressed by young people, will be critical to setting the stage for the youth attraction work to come.

Putting your knowledge to work

Once a community gathers input from a variety of young people, understands the resources available and is organized, it is time to get to work! An integrated approach is encouraged that incorporates entrepreneurship education and career development, community service and leadership opportunities with youth, and adult mentoring and community investment in youth

enterprises. These three elements are incorporated into a flexible Youth Engagement Framework that responds to local priorities and resources.

Youth Engagement Framework



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The goal of this interconnected approach is to leverage the important elements of youth engagement in a coordinated fashion from early childhood to young adulthood. Each of the three elements is very important, but falls short without the other two. Examples of this include:

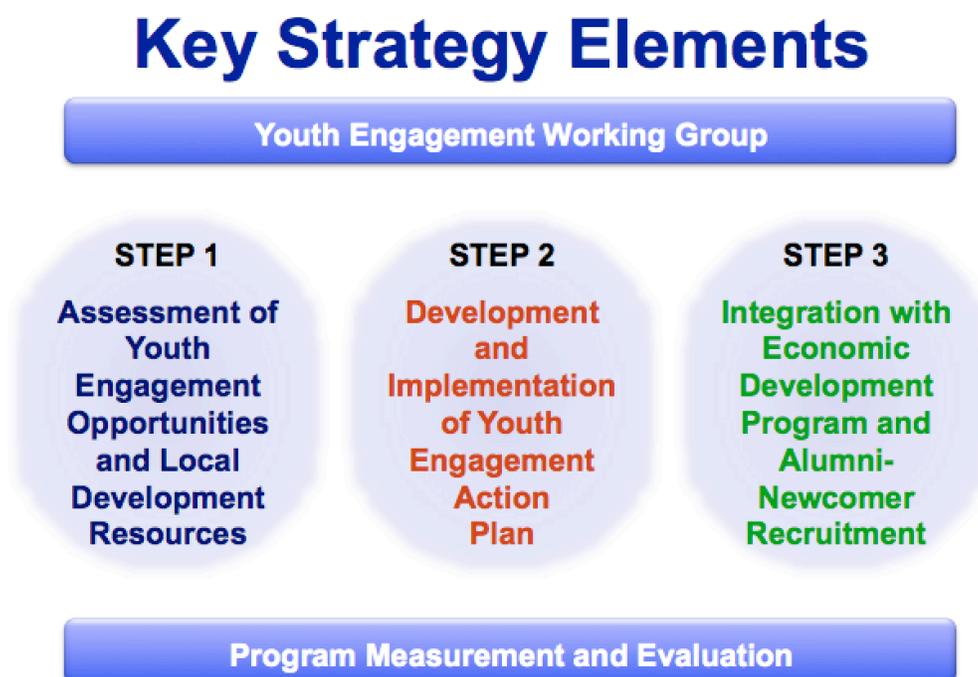
- Having a strong entrepreneurship program, but weak connections with the community – youth experiences do not go beyond the classroom learning environment and they therefore assume they must leave their hometown to pursue their career goals.
- Involving youth in community leadership roles, but not entrepreneurship and career development – youth may fail to see career and business opportunities in their own hometown, and therefore feel they must leave to make a living.
- Adults talking about the importance of youth to the community’s future, but do not provide venues for youth to get involved or pathways to career or business opportunities – youth feel undervalued and “encouraged” to leave the community.

Some recommended action steps that communities can explore, which have been successfully linked to survey results in rural communities include:

- ✓ Involve youth in every phase of planning community improvement projects. Through such involvement and mentoring by adult leaders, future leaders of the community are nurtured with a stake in the future of their hometown.
- ✓ Introduce entrepreneurship education in the school system or as an extracurricular program beginning at middle school age. Create a mentorship program where students can shadow local entrepreneurs and gain hands-on knowledge and experience.
- ✓ Support the development and growth of small and medium-sized businesses that offer quality jobs and business ownership opportunities for young people. Provide technical assistance and business coaching in the development of businesses owned by young people.

Key Strategy Elements

Communities should not miss the opportunity to mobilize the potential of their young people. Building on the elements discussed, there are three key steps for implementing a youth engagement strategy led by a locally organized working group, as illustrated below.



These steps proceed from the youth assessment and resources mapping in Step 1, to developing a Youth Engagement Action Plan in Step 2. Ultimately, an effective youth

engagement strategy is integrated with a community's economic development program, and a game plan for attracting alums and newcomers as young adults and families with children in Step 3. It is this integrated strategy that leads to results that can be measured and evaluated over time, all building off of the opportunities expressed by young people who want to stay or return to their hometowns to pursue their career goals, and raise their own children there.

Call to Action

The prospects for rural communities can be very different in the future than during the Industrial Age economy of the past century when many jobs were created around urban centers. We are now well into an entrepreneurial and networked economy where young people choose where they want to live and then pursue making a living there. As this paper illustrates, many rural youth desire to build their future in their hometowns, but this opportunity will only come to communities that respond, acting upon the aspirations of their young people, investing in developing their knowledge and skills, and creating the environment for them to become successful young adults.



For more information on youth engagement and conducting a youth assessment, please contact Craig Schroeder at craigschroeder@mac.com or (402) 423-8788.