

Building Capacity for Youth Development in Rural Areas

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INTRODUCTION

Community development involves a community's assets and using them to provide the greatest benefit to the community (Kelly & Caputo, 2006). Positive community development occurs when capacity building is increased (Brademas & Weber, 1999; Kelly & Caputo, 2006). Community capacity is developed when a community's "human, physical, financial, and social resources" are mobilized to "identify and respond to its own needs" (Kelly & Caputo, 2006, p. 236). People who build community capacity are empowered to develop their own potential and to work with one another to benefit the community (Brademas & Weber, 1999).

Developing community capacity and maximizing limited resources in rural areas are essential. Recent literature indicates that youth development and community development are interdependent (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007; Seidl, Mulkey, & Blanton, 1999). Building capacity for youth development programs in rural areas can provide a way for youth to engage in larger community development processes, thus growing and developing while benefitting the community as a whole (Seidl, Mulkey, & Blanton, 1999).

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

1. Youth in rural areas might not have a variety of opportunities for their development.
2. Communities should coordinate their limited resources to get more accomplished.
3. Engaging everyone, including youth, expands rural areas' capacity for youth development.
4. Local solutions created through community involvement provide opportunities for positive community development.
5. Localized program design assists sustainable community development.

DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

Fewer opportunities for youth development in rural areas

Youth in rural areas have fewer opportunities for development. For example, rural students are reportedly less satisfied with their communities than urban students (Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996). Rural youth may also be more susceptible to boredom, which could lead to increased risk of delinquent behaviors (Caldwell & Smith, 2006). In addition, rural youth face more stereotypes than urban youth and may have lower aspirations for education and careers (Backman, 1990; Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989; Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996). Unfortunately, many rural youth leave their home areas and do not return, a factor that is troubling for long-term community development (Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996; Afterschool Alliance, 2007; Haller & Virkler, 1993).

Rural youth also have less access to youth development programs, less variety of programs to choose from, and less access to transportation than urban youth (Afterschool Alliance, 2007; Bowman, Manoogian, & Driscoll, 2002; Brown, Swanson, & Barton, 2003; Hobbs, 1999; Lutfiyya, Lipsky, Wisdom-Behounek, & Inpanbutr-Martinkus; Moore, et al., 2010). Rural areas often lack financing that urban areas can afford and lack professional leadership and coordination of existing recreation resources (Brademas & Weber, 1999). Youth in rural areas often have less access to technological assets than urban youth (Elbert & Alston, 2005). This lack can affect occupational opportunities, educational growth, and skill development of rural young people (Elbert & Alston, 2005). To overcome some of these disparities, investing in

capacity building in these communities is necessary (Backer, 2000).

Coordinating community efforts

Coordination across community organizations can provide a more diverse variety of youth development programs in rural areas. Through partnerships, communities can “identify and channel resources” to help efficiently accomplish capacity-building program goals (Wendel, et al., 2009, p. 276). Effective partnerships can help locate volunteers, train staff members, increase positive communication between programs and the community, provide specific resources such as access to technology and transportation, and fund programs (Elbert & Alston, 2005; Kelly & Caputo, 2006; Wendel, et al., 2009).

Tax increases to fund and maintain capacity growth are unlikely in rural communities. Therefore, other sources of funding, such as contributions from civic, religious, or business associations, should be explored (Seidl, Mulkey, & Blanton, 1999). Because rural areas might be unable to hire a professional, year-round recreation coordinator, even with alternate sources of funds, Brademas and Weber (1999) suggest hiring a recreation professional to coordinate area programs in the summer, rather than the entire year. Many rural residents recognize the usefulness of recreation programs and believe recreation opportunities in their community should be expanded. These residents are likely to support the hiring of a professional summer program coordinator. Some rural areas have established funding hire such a coordinator. The necessary funding will likely come from the community, so engaging individuals and organizations as stakeholders is invaluable (Brademas & Weber, 1999).

Engaging all available stakeholders

For successful youth development efforts, trusted local stakeholders must be involved (Edwards, Miller & Blackburn, 2011). Rural areas, in particular, often face increasingly limited resources in program options, staff, and volunteers. Stakeholders can be vital sources for capacity building (Elbert & Alston, 2005). Through partnerships and the provision of volunteers and workers, stakeholders can provide valuable sources of support to influence change in the community. Good workers and diverse, quality partnerships can contribute to successful capacity development (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007; Brademas & Weber, 1999). When approaching youth development capacity building in rural areas, all stakeholders, including the youth for whom programs are being created, should be involved.

Youth hold untapped capacity for community development, but are often overlooked as stakeholders, which limits the growth of community development in rural areas (Seidl, Mulkey, & Blanton, 1999). Using these young people’s abilities benefits the community and the youth themselves (Seidl, Mulkey, & Blanton, 1999). Youth can provide resources such as time, enthusiasm, and active engagement (Brademas & Weber, 1999). These resources help programs succeed. Benefits to involved youth include increasing their knowledge, skills, and engagement; finding a place in the community; and learning how to contribute to a community (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007).

The importance of community involvement and local solutions

Rural community members of all ages should be part of creating and maintaining capacity building programs for youth development (Korten, 1980). To accomplish this community-wide engagement, organizations should concentrate on members of the rural community “[making] more of the programming decisions for themselves” (Korten, 1980, p. 487). This involvement accesses community understanding that is “crucial to any effort by outsiders... but easily overlooked by planners who have not had—or do not seek—the opportunity to ask” (Korten, 1980, p. 498). Community members provide an understanding of community beliefs and developmental desires (Wendel, et al., 2009). Use of this local knowledge helps develop a clear vision of the community, its resources, and its process to communicate and grow (Gruidl & Hustedde, 2003).

Relying on solutions outside of the community can undercut community capacity building (Wendel, et al., 2009). Growth occurs when rural communities work out problems without heavily relying on outside sources, although some initial resources such as funding and training may be necessary. This independence creates “community agency,” or the capacity for a community to affect change. Community agency can develop through accessing potential capacity and empowering residents to create an outcome that benefits the rural community (Brademas & Weber, 1999; Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007). Empowerment enables residents to recognize challenges and develop solutions; this, in turn, assists the community in developing “a sense of self-determination and capacity” (Gibbon, Labonte, & Laverack, 2002, p. 487).

Localized program design processes

Building capacity may require changes in approaches to program development and community engagement (Gruidl & Hustedde, 2003). Organizations designing programs in rural areas might need to take a “blueprint approach,” using a design from another program without making adjustments to address the changed context of the program (Korten, 1980). However, capacity building in rural areas is best accomplished by taking a “learning process approach,” taking context into account. These programs are responsive to community needs, and community members are involved in establishing the programs (Korten, 1980). Programs designed using the blueprint approach are not as effective in rural communities as the creatively formed, contextually-based programs developed from the learning process approach (Backer, 2000).

Successful rural development programs deal with mistakes in a positive manner (Korten, 1980). The learning process approach allows programs to evolve through freedom to admit failure and make adaptations. Capacity development is a long-term commitment, which often requires program modifications (Backer, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Rural youth face challenges that affect their health, educational development, and recreation opportunities. These challenges can be conquered by effectively mobilizing and accessing the limited resources of their communities (Kelly & Caputo, 2006; Wendel, et al., 2009). Through partnerships with stakeholders of all ages, community involvement, local solutions, and the learning process approach, rural areas can increase community capacity (Wendel, et al., 2009; Backer, 2000). Capacity building in rural areas can enhance positive youth development and improve the quality of life the community (Backer, 2000; Seidl, Mulkey, & Blanton, 1999).

AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NEEDED

Developing capacity in rural areas can benefit from increased community involvement. Research on increasing the involvement of stakeholders—specifically parents—would be beneficial. Transportation also can be an issue in rural areas. Research on ways to provide rural areas with more efficient and cost-effective transportation could increase involvement in programs, therefore building capacity. Effective training methods that require less time and money would also be beneficial. Shorter and less expensive training opportunities may allow working adults to get more involved in capacity development within their communities.

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