Community-Centered Research Series:
Measuring What Matters

TAKE THE PLUNGE! AN OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY-CENTERED RESEARCH

Community-based research (by and for the community) is important in planning for meaningful and positive community change.

This type of research is not only desirable, it is feasible.

By providing community input as a tangible next step, this series will encourage community excitement about moving forward with community-centered research.

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TAKE THE PLUNGE!  
AN OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY-CENTERED RESEARCH
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INTRODUCTION

People in business find the phrase “You cannot measure what you cannot manage.” The concept behind this simple phrase is surprisingly powerful. First, it is impossible to pursue any objective without information about your progress. If your goal is merely to increase profit, you cannot assess your progress without measuring profit. But perhaps more importantly, the things an organization measures go a long way toward defining what it values. The culture and identity of an organization both shape—and are shaped by—the things it measures. If a company measures quality, concern for quality eventually permeates the fabric of the company. But if a company measures employee turnover and morale, it will be a distinctly different organization.

THE PEOPLE DOING THE MEASURING DO THE LEARNING

The community development field would be well-served to embrace the phrase “You are what you measure” mantra, but there is an additional dimension that could be added. Particularly for rural communities, an important notion is that “The people doing the measuring do the learning.” People in small rural communities often doubt that they have the expertise or resources to measure critical community attributes. They sometimes assume that it is necessary to entrust the task to non-resident experts. But the assumptions that cause communities to shy away from self-assessment are not necessarily valid. Although some kinds of research require specialized skills, arguably the majority do not. And while it may be true that in some communities relatively small groups of people provide the core of the leadership, community-centered research offers an excellent opportunity to bring additional people into that leadership cadre. As tempting as it is to either avoid community assessment or to contract it out, communities should take ownership in the process of defining and measuring key community variables.

There is a growing trend toward competitively awarded funding mechanisms, from both governmental and non-governmental sources, to meet a wide range of educational, public safety, and infrastructure needs. The days of community being automatically eligible for their share of a pool of funds—and for that share to be sufficient to pay for programs—are long gone. Haste is the name of the game, and communities must hold for supplemental funding to meet their needs. Communities that are able to tell compelling stories about their needs and goals are in the best position to compete for these funds. Data developed through effective self-assessment may make all the difference in that competition.

Communities should measure the things they care about.

Social scientists question the assumption that external experts are somehow able to generate better or more legitimate information than can the community members themselves. Granted, the experts have spent more time thinking about arcane definitions and statistical issues. While it is true that some economic models are so specialized as to demand training, no single field of expertise has mastered the ability to ask the big, crosscutting questions that can define a community’s future.

In community assessment, each observer brings a unique perspective to bear; just as the experts are “right” from their perspectives, astute observers from within the community can be just as “right.”

Everyone is “right.”

CREATING A COMMUNITY NARRATIVE

Community-centered research is not merely the generation of statistics and charts. More appropriately, it is the creation of a community narrative—a story that explains what the community is and what its residents care about. In literature, there is no question about the value of a first-person narrative; who better to tell the story of someone’s life than that very person? By the same token, community members are uniquely well qualified to tell their own stories; they don’t need experts to interpret—or legitimize—their experiences. Experts may be vitally useful mentors and resources, but their notions of what is important are no more valid than those of community members themselves.

A key step in community-centered research is the interpretation of information. Consider the various ways in which a basic statistic such as unemployment rate might be interpreted. An economist from the state employment service might view a 6% unemployment rate as a problem if the national average is 4%. A local resident might be pleased with that rate if the rate had recently been 10%—before a new employer came to town. Still another resident, fearing continued “brain drain” of the community’s most capable youth, might be more concerned about the types of jobs available than the sheer abundance of them. All of these perspectives are “right,” yet none tells the whole story. The process of community-centered research brings together multiple perspectives to tell a far more nuanced story than can emerge from any single point of view. Longtime residents, newcomers, youth, seniors, elected officials, and informal leaders all have valid perspectives that no one can articulate better than they themselves can.

CONCLUSIONS

Community-centered research is both desirable and feasible. Most rural communities have the resources needed to conduct their own assessments. Only a small fraction of the tasks involved in a thorough self-assessment might be beyond the capacity of even the most rural community. Communities should take the lead in generating credible information that describes themselves—because if community residents do not, other people or agencies will.

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About the Author

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Measuring What Matters series provides encouragement, support, and tools for communities engaged in self-assessment. It is a comprehensive road map for understanding what community-centered research is, what forms it might take, and what it might accomplish.

The series consists of this overview and subsequent articles written by university faculty from across the West. The authors have experience working with rural communities, knowledge of self-assessment principles and techniques, and a good sense of the issues rural communities face.

We encourage you to collect the entire series. Each issue is three-hole punched for easy storage in your own resource binder. Other Measuring What Matters issues published in Winter 2003 are:

• Using the Internet for Community Analysis: Sources of Western Data (CCR 2)
• Surveys as Tools for Community-Centered Research (CCR 3)
• Video as a Tool for Community-Centered Research (CCR 4)
• Trust, Ethics and Credibility in Community-Centered Research (CCR 5)

Watch for additional topics being developed as Measuring What Matters publications. These include:

• Qualitative Data
• Race/Ethnic/Language Considerations
• The Importance of Partnerships
• Community Mobilization
• Case Studies

The Measuring What Matters (CCR) series is available in PDF format on the WRDC website, and in paper format through the USU Extension Publications office:

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