

NATIONAL RESEARCH AGENDA

American Association for Agricultural Education
 2011- 2015 Research Priority Areas

Vibrant, Resilient Communities

Vibrant, Resilient Communities

Key Outcome: *Local communities will have effective leaders and engaged citizens who ensure high quality educational and career development opportunities for youth and adults and proactively sustain an environment conducive to positive community change.*

Informed
Choices

Background

Research has verified the critical role of families and communities in helping youth obtain the knowledge and skills they need for productive lives (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). Schools are not solely responsible for student academic success, and families and communities must work together to help students reach their full potential (Lerner, 1995).

Communities with strong and active social networks have high civic engagement and focus on activities that serve the public at large (Putnam, 1993). These communities have a pattern of community action that is characterized by positive youth-adult relationships in a caring community environment. However, communities today face a number of increasingly complex challenges, including changing economic drivers, wide-ranging income levels, population and demographic changes, land use decisions, accessibility to information and communications technologies, civic apathy, and management and protection of natural resources and the environment. When compared to urban areas, higher poverty, hunger, and more limited health care and recreational opportunities have historically plagued rural communities. According to Israel et al. (2001), localities differ in their ability to enhance community social capital.

Inequality, isolation, dependency, and gaps in the organization and institutional structure can inhibit community action. Communities that are fragmented, manipulated by outside organizations, or limited by smallness or distance are less likely to increase their social capital or...be able to address local youths' educational achievement. Until these structural deficiencies are confronted, many communities will be less able to muster the social capital needed to make a real difference in local youths' lives. (p. 63)

In addition, citizens in communities with lower educational levels, income levels, and job skills tend to withhold investments in education, which may further suppress educational attainment and career aspirations (Israel et al., 2001). In contrast, Drabenstott and Sheaff (2001) suggested that prosperous communities regularly invest in

the human and social capital of their people and institutions.

Despite efforts by numerous agencies over the years to strengthen local communities, many citizens are not engaged in proactively shaping the future vitality and character of their communities. According to Beaulieu and Israel (2010), civic engagement is on the decline by groups that typically comprise the majority of small communities – those who are less educated, older, and have less wealth. These researchers found that the quality of educational resources, level of educational attainment, and personal and community aspirations exert a major influence on community civic health.

For many years some of the best and brightest youth in rural communities – those who could become future leaders in the community – have relocated to urban areas where employment opportunities are more diverse and attractive. In addition, a growing proportion of the population in all types of communities is neither engaged in nor knowledgeable about agriculture and the vital role it plays in sustaining the abundant way of life enjoyed by many Americans.

Local leadership capacity and level of civic engagement can dramatically affect the quality of life in a rural community. Greater educational opportunity and achievement, a more diverse economic base, higher career aspirations, and greater community vitality can be created by effective leaders and citizens engaged in shared community goals. Once the vision of a dynamic community is embraced, strategic planning, quality of life considerations, leadership and economic development, and a sense of community logically follow (Center for Rural Affairs, 2010).

Challenges

Communities that lack vigor and capacity have great difficulty in responding to the increasingly complex challenges present in many communities today. Maintaining an engaged citizenry and diverse economic base in rural communities, including profitable agricultural enterprises and other significant economic drivers (e.g., natural resources, tourism, manufacturing, mining), requires capable leadership and strong social networks. Low-capacity

Technologies,
Practices &
Products

Scientific &
Professional
Workforce

Meaningful,
Engaged
Learning

Efficient &
Effective
Programs

communities commonly have limited employment opportunities, educational resources, and worker skills. These limitations can create a downward spiral in which unhealthy community characteristics become more ingrained in the mindset of citizens, leaders, and youth in the community.

Lack of citizen and leader understanding and appreciation of the vital role that agriculture plays in their daily lives leads to policy decisions and community action that ignore the needs of a prosperous agriculture industry and its ability to meet societal needs. Ineffective community leadership prohibits the positive community change needed to transform unhealthy communities into high-capacity communities characterized by diverse employment opportunities, skilled workers, high levels of educational attainment, and broad career aspirations in youth and adults.

Opportunities to Respond

As a discipline, agricultural education with its five sub-dimensions is uniquely positioned to assist in developing solutions related to the human dynamics of struggling communities. With a focus on the development of individuals as capable, informed, and independently productive citizens who can effectively interface in diverse group and team settings, particularly in an agriculture and natural resources context, agricultural education researchers can effectively apply their disciplinary expertise in education, communications, leadership, and change processes to the complex problems and challenges faced by local communities today.

Strong local communities have effective leaders and engaged citizens who ensure high quality educational and career development opportunities for youth and adults and proactively sustain an environment conducive to positive community change and growth. Communities that lack vigor and capacity have great difficulty in responding to the increasingly complex challenges present in many communities today. Additional research is needed to ensure the environment where positive community change transforms unhealthy communities into high-capacity communities. Our areas of scientific focus should:

- » Examine the aspects of vibrant, resilient communities that encourage youth and adults to become future members and leaders of the community.
- » Develop mechanisms to evaluate the capacity of a local community to lead positive change, and identify the factors that exert significant influence on change processes and outcomes.
- » Determine the factors that influence the educational and career aspirations of citizens in rural communities.
- » Determine the effects of technology use and interpersonal and mass communication methods on community dynamics and citizen engagement.
- » Design and test models for increasing civic engagement in local communities and for increasing the social capital of local communities.

REFERENCES

- Beaulieu, L. J., & G. D. Israel. (2010). Communities in rural America: Current realities and emerging strategies. In J. W. Robinson and G. P. Green (Eds.), *Introduction to community development: Theory, practice, and service-learning* (pp. 169-191). New York, NY: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Center for Rural Affairs. (2010). *Community development strategies: Yes, it can fit in your budget*. Retrieved from <http://www.cfra.org/renewrural/rc thrive>
- Israel, G. D., Beaulieu, L. J., & Hartless, G. (2001). The influence of family and community social capital on educational attainment. *Rural Sociology*, 66(1), 43-68.
- Lerner, R. M. (1995). *America's youth in crisis: Challenges and options for programs and policies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.



ADDITIONS