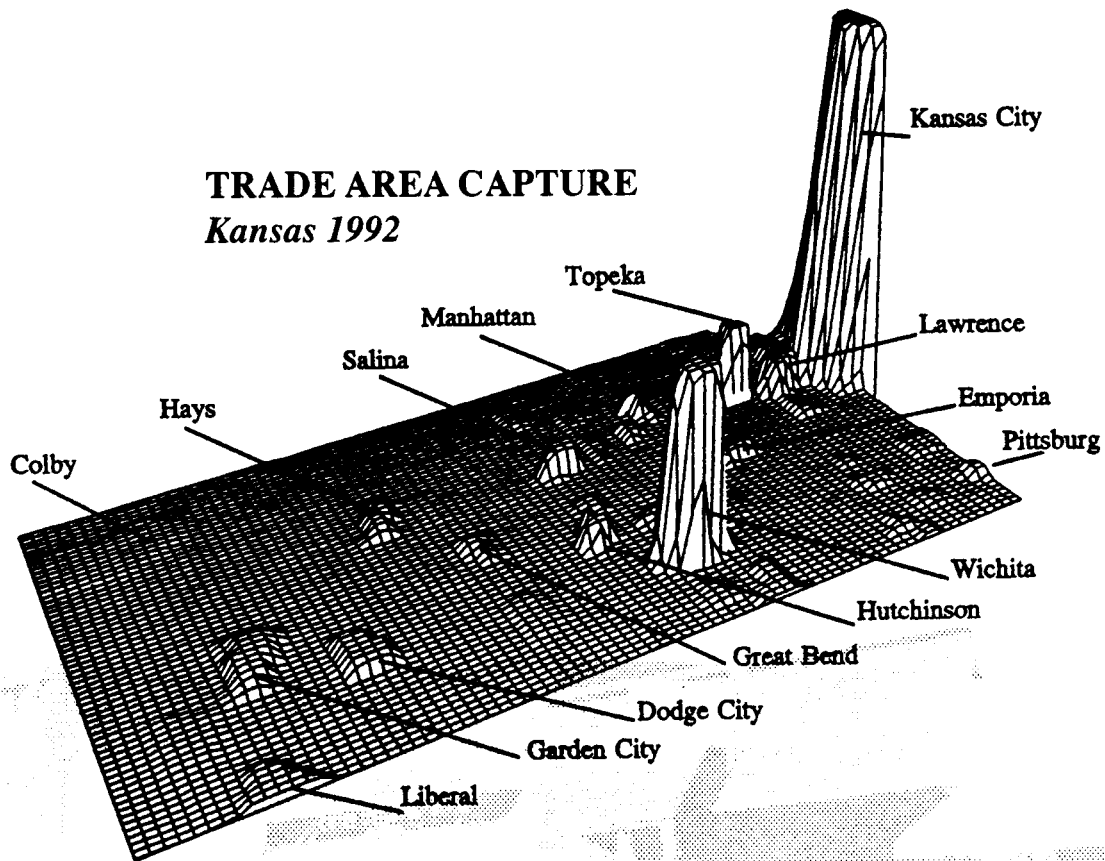


COPING STRATEGIES OF SUCCESSFUL RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Agricultural Experiment Station, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Marc A. Johnson, Director

COPING STRATEGIES OF SUCCESSFUL RURAL COMMUNITIES¹

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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the results of an interdisciplinary study of five rural Kansas communities during 1993 and 1994. “Successful” communities were selected using factor analysis of existing data and then were clustered by cluster analysis. In each of the five communities, business and civic leaders and residents were interviewed through focus group sessions. Additionally, focus group members completed a questionnaire. The same questionnaire was mailed to residents in three of the five communities; the response rate was 42%. Findings include:

The leaders of these successful communities were generally in agreement with the residents about the needs and wants of the communities.

The interviewed residents showed a general level of optimism. This optimism was balanced with a practical attitude toward community survival during difficult times.

A shortage of housing in these communities was identified as the most critical problem. A lack of affordable housing means the inability to attract small industry to the communities.

Another identified problem was the inability to keep young people in these communities because of a lack of good jobs.

Good schools were very important to these communities. However, not all of the schools were located physically in the successful communities.

Support by local residents and businesses was essential to the success of these rural communities.

Findings from this study currently are being shared with other communities for the purpose of strategic planning and development.

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INTRODUCTION

At one time, small, rural communities were thriving trade centers in which retail and service businesses and jobs were considered to be tied to the success of the basic industries in the region. In many cases, this is no longer true (Anding et al., 1990). Basic industries, such as agriculture and manufacturing, have declined in employment and importance. As a result of these changes, markets in rural communities are not stable, and change is inherent. Despite these changes, many rural communities continue to exist; in fact, some actually are thriving (Anding et al., 1990; Lukermann et al., 1991). Successful rural communities apparently adapt and find ways to progress even during difficult times.

A continuum of success exists among rural communities in Kansas. These apparent differences led to this study of the coping strategies of five successful Kansas communities.

PROCEDURES

From a population of 294 incorporated places in Kansas, rural communities that met the following criteria were identified: (1) fewer than 20,000 residents, (2) located in a non-metropolitan county, and (3) serving the trade center function at the minimum convenience center level or above.

The existing data for these communities were factor analyzed to determine the common characteristics of communities within the sample. Variables in the factor analyses included community position in the hierarchy of trade centers, pull factors, community economic base, proximity to nearest regional shopping mall, proximity to the nearest Wal-Mart, community population change, regional population change, per capita income, percentage of residents who were elderly, transfer payments as a percentage of total personal income, whether or not the community was a county seat, and proximity to major highways.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology also was employed to map characteristics used in measuring the success of rural communities and assist team members in identifying similar characteristics among these communities.

Using factor scores and demographic characteristics, cluster analysis then was used to determine the types of communities grouping together. Five successful rural communities with different populations were identified using this methodology. The communities were Courtland (population of 339), Westmoreland (population of 553), Quinter (population of 958), Hillsboro (population of 2688), and Beloit (population of 4070).³ These were not the only successful communities, but rather each of

these communities was selected from a cluster of successful communities.

Three focus groups involving business leaders, community leaders, and residents were conducted in each of the five successful communities. Each focus group was asked the same questions, which included how they described their community, how their community had changed in the last 5 years, anticipated community changes in the next 5 years, the best thing about their community, their community's biggest weakness, outside agency resources used for community betterment, and how they defined their community.

Focus group members in each of the 15 sessions also were asked to complete a questionnaire about satisfaction with and importance of different community services, quality of life, changes they would like to see in their communities, the perceived level of community support, and demographic characteristics.

Additionally, the same questionnaire was mailed to residents in three of the five communities (Courtland, Quinter, and Westmoreland) to learn about perceptions among everyday citizens in addition to community leaders.

³ Population counts are from the Division of the Budget in Topeka, KS. July 1, 1993.

RESULTS

Selection of Communities

The factor analysis of the existing data for the Kansas communities revealed

four factors that represented 51% of the variation among the communities. The first, which will be called "urbanism," included variables representing county income, population density, manufacturing dollars, and service industries. The second factor was influence of government, which included government, nets for out-commuting and in-commuting, and per capita wages. The third factor, distance, included distance to the nearest mall, distance to the nearest major highway, and distance to the nearest discount department store. The fourth factor, change in aging, included variables representing per capita transfer payments, change in population, and distance to other (other than K-Mart or Wal-Mart) discount stores.

Using raw factor scores, a five-cluster solution was requested for the 294 communities. Table 1 indicates the final clustering solutions.

These five clusters of communities then were combined with community size (Kansas Business District Classifications) to assist in selection of representative communities. Table 2 indicates the distribution of clusters across different community sizes.

Focus Group Results

In all five of the communities, focus group participants were very positive about their towns. Terms like "friendly", "involved", "quality schools", "clean", "caring people", and "safe" were used by participants in all of the focus groups in all of the communities.

The greatest problems that were identified by focus group participants were

the need for inexpensive quality housing and the need for good jobs to keep young people in the communities. They also were concerned about aging community leaders and the need for young people in leadership roles.

Several of the communities had incurred some rather substantial changes in the last 5 to 10 years, including school mergers and the loss of businesses and medical services. Interestingly, the focus group participants viewed these changes quite optimistically. This finding may represent the importance of optimism to a successful community or it may indicate only a hesitation among focus group participants to air their problems to outsiders. Team members conducting the focus groups were Kansas State University faculty and not local residents in the studied communities.

All five of the successful communities had used several outside agencies in assisting them with community betterment. Agencies that were mentioned were the PRIDE program, Farm Home Administration, the Area Agency on Aging, a Small Business Development Center, Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service, the Kansas Department of Commerce, the Economic Development Committee, and the Bureau of Reclamation.

Each of the communities had an annual event of some sort that seemed to result in pulling the residents together for the common good of the town.

In each of the communities, groups were meeting to work on projects. Some were more centrally organized than others. Some of the communities started a strategic

planning process but then worked in smaller groups to accomplish the tasks. A few of the communities had defined groups for strategic planning. However, the majority apparently responded to needs or issues as they arose in their communities.

Questionnaire Results

The questionnaires that were completed by focus group participants as well as local residents in three of the communities indicated overwhelming dissatisfaction with local availability of housing. Some dissatisfaction with the cost of housing, county leaders, roads, and youth activities also was expressed. Overall, however, the respondents were quite satisfied with most of their community's services and facilities (Table 3).

The questionnaire asked a series of questions about satisfaction with local services and facilities and how important these same local services and facilities were to the respondent. As can be seen in Tables 4-8, the combination of these questions allowed for the determination of areas that the communities might choose to emphasize or de-emphasize. For instance, Beloit questionnaires indicated that the most important variables (those with which focus group participants were least satisfied) were community pride and housing availability. Conversely, the least important variables (those with which focus group participants were most satisfied) were outdoor recreation facilities and phone service. This information could be useful to a community in determining resource allocation.

Differences between Responses from Focus Groups and Mailed Survey

In the three communities in which the survey was mailed to general residents, we were able to determine differences between focus group participants and general residents in their responses to the same questions. Very few statistically significant differences in responses occurred between the groups, indicating that focus group participants were sensitive to or in agreement with the preferences of the residents.

The only statistically significant differences between the focus group participants and the mailed questionnaire respondents were as follows. In Quinter, focus group participants were more satisfied than mailed survey respondents with the willingness of residents to work together and also with county leaders. Focus group participants in Quinter were more opinionated than mailed questionnaire respondents about the affordability of local housing.

In Courtland, focus group participants were more satisfied with roads than mailed questionnaire respondents. Focus group participants also felt more strongly about the willingness of residents to invest their time and money in Courtland than did the mailed survey respondents.

Focus group participants in Westmoreland were more satisfied than mailed survey respondents with local outdoor recreation facilities, schools, county government officials, youth activities, and roads. These statistically significant differences may indicate a lack of agreement

among residents and community leaders in Westmoreland about several issues.

CONCLUSIONS

We found that leaders in successful communities were generally in tune with those communities, recognizing the same needs as the average resident recognized. No magical solutions were found for the problems that were raised, but several of the communities had indicated their willingness to address their problems by forming committees and by learning from other communities.

These communities were willing users of services that have been provided by agencies throughout the state. However, they were not reliant on outside forces. They indicated that their lifeblood consisted of the people who lived there. The willingness of local residents and businesses to support these communities by shopping locally, hiring locally, funding local businesses, assisting in plans for business owners to sell their businesses to younger residents, and accommodating for future changes as they occur was identified by focus group participants as the reason why their communities were successful.

Each of these successful communities indicated a desire to continue in the success mode by learning more about their communities. They have requested information from Cooperative Extension about determining the ability of their communities to sustain certain types of businesses.

All of the successful communities had positive, optimistic, community leaders.

This optimism, however, was balanced with a firm grasp of the challenging realities facing rural communities.

The findings of this research currently are being shared with other communities for the purpose of strategic planning and development. This research has been used in assisting in the development of Cooperative Extension publications, face-to-face meetings with several communities, and research publications and presentations. Additionally, peer-to-peer community sharing is being encouraged. Peer communities clustered together in the cluster analysis by factor scores. These communities share many similar attributes. Possibly, this will allow the peer communities to work together in the future whenever they face obstacles or receive rewards.

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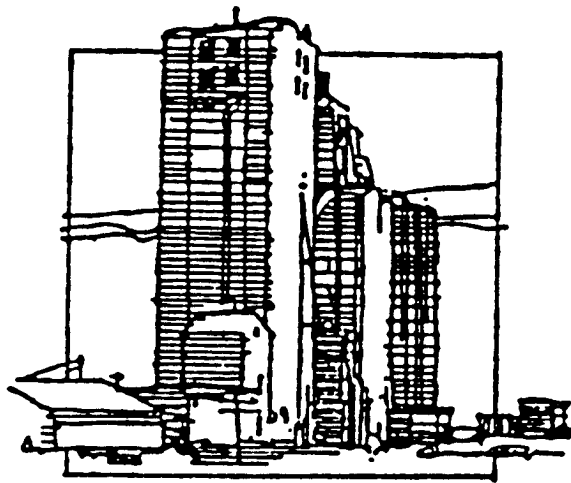


Table 1: Clustering of Communities by Factors

Clusters	Urbanism	Government Influence	Distance	Change in Aging
1	.5240	8.7554	-1.2258	-.2578
2	1.0060	.0595	1.7717	.4053
3	.8062	-.4011	-.6950	-.5038
4	-.9207	.1681	.8895	-1.9527
5	-.4652	.0008	-.0938	.5200

Table 2: Community Clusters by Kansas Business District Classifications (Population)

Clusters	201-1200	1201-3000	3001-5000	5001-10000	> 10000
1	1	1			1
2	17	6	3	1	2
3	50	16	4	3	8
4	12	9	3	1	1
5	94	46	10	5	

Table 3: Satisfaction with and Importance of Community Services, n=320

Community Services	Percentage Who Were Satisfied or Very Satisfied	Percentage Who Said Important or Very Important
Churches	85.5	92.8
Fire Protection	89.7	99.0
Financial Services	90.0	95.8
Outdoor Recreation	62.6	74.6
Community Pride	80.7	92.1
Schools	88.2	98.1
Residents Working Together	72.2	91.2
Law Enforcement	65.3	92.7
Local Shopping & Stores	49.3	88.5
Telephone Services	66.9	95.4
Town Leaders	64.4	92.7
County Leaders	49.3	90.1
Housing Availability	25.9	90.4
Housing Affordability	44.1	89.7
Hospitals	84.3	97.3
Health Care	78.9	97.6
Youth Activities	52.8	87.8
Trash Service	81.9	87.3
Roads	50.2	93.5

Table 4: Satisfaction and Importance, Beloit

<p>MOST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Churches, fire protection, financial services, schools, law enforcement, hospitals, health care</p>	<p>MOST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Outdoor recreation facilities, telephone service</p>
<p>LEAST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Community pride, housing availability</p>	<p>LEAST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Residents working together, stores and shopping, town leaders, county leaders, youth activities, trash service, roads</p>

Table 5: Satisfaction and Importance, Courtland

<p>MOST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Churches, fire protection, financial services, schools, residents working together</p>	<p>MOST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Outdoor recreation facilities, community pride, telephone service, town leaders, trash service</p>
<p>LEAST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Law enforcement, hospitals, health care, roads</p>	<p>LEAST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Stores and shopping, county leaders, availability of housing, affordability of housing, youth activities</p>

Table 6: Satisfaction and Importance, Hillsboro

<p>MOST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Churches, schools, residents working together, law enforcement</p>	<p>MOST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Fire protection, financial services, town leaders, trash service, roads</p>
<p>LEAST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Stores and shopping, housing availability, housing affordability, hospitals, health care, youth activities</p>	<p>LEAST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Outdoor recreation facilities, community pride, telephone service, county leaders</p>

Table 7: Satisfaction and Importance, Quinter

<p>MOST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Churches, fire protection, financial services, schools, residents working together, hospitals, health care</p>	<p>MOST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Community pride, trash service</p>
<p>LEAST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Telephone service, affordability of housing</p>	<p>LEAST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Outdoor recreation facilities, law enforcement, stores and shopping, town leaders, county leaders, housing availability, youth activities, roads</p>

Table 8: Satisfaction and Importance. Westmoreland

<p>MOST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Fire protection, financial services, community pride, schools, law enforcement, hospitals, roads</p>	<p>MOST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Churches, trash service</p>
<p>LEAST SATISFIED, MOST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Telephone service, town leaders, health care</p>	<p>LEAST SATISFIED, LEAST IMPORTANT</p> <p>Outdoor recreation facilities, residents working together, stores and shopping, county leaders, housing availability, housing affordability, youth activities</p>

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