

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 middle school through 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 practical 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 over a decade, surveys completed by middle school through 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 (51%) 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.

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.*

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 employers say one of their greatest challenges is, “there are not enough young people to fill our jobs openings.”



Survey Results

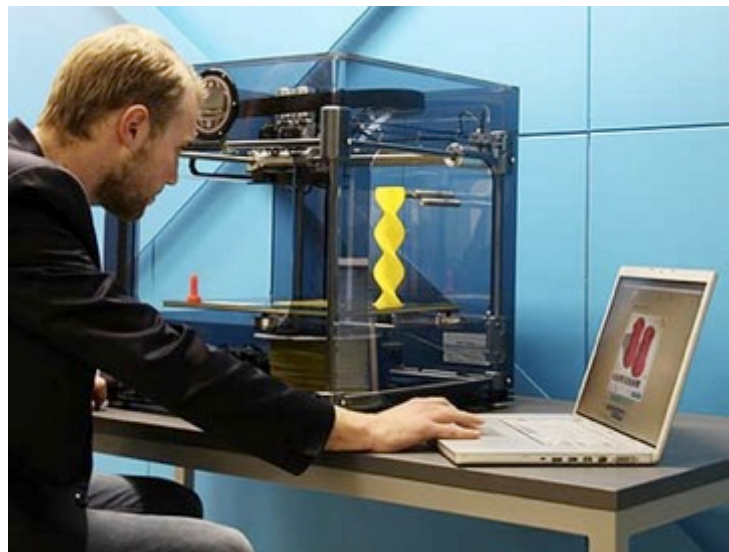
The manner for conducting the survey ensures that many responses are received in quality-controlled classroom environments. In most cases, over 80% of the student body between 6th and 12th grades participate in the survey. The 40,000 plus youth responding to date have some valuable thoughts to share –

this despite the fact that 63% 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.

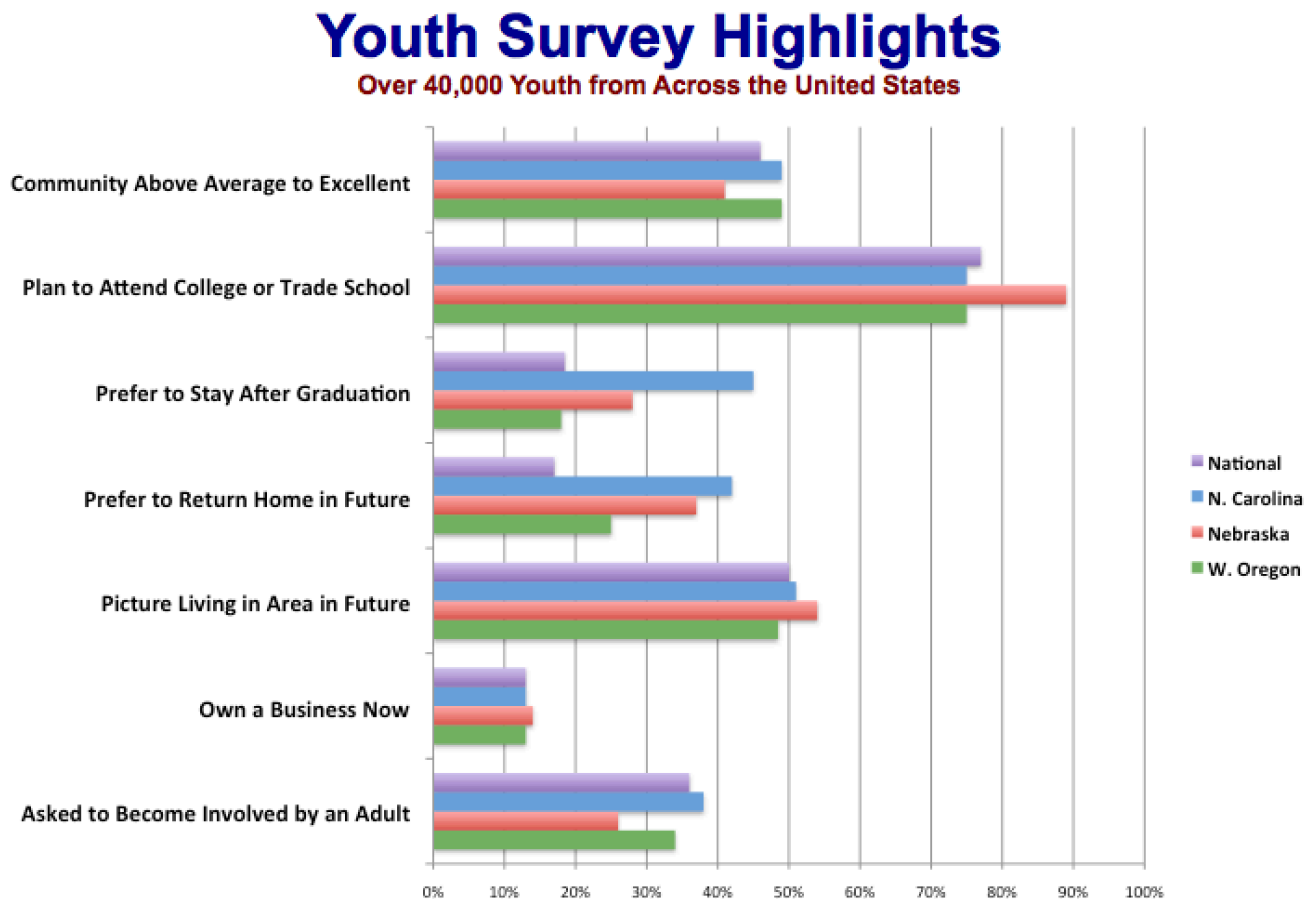
A number of young people also expressed entrepreneurial aspirations that could be realized right at home. Indeed, entrepreneurial young people can be a rural community’s best opportunity for economic growth and wealth creation. This is especially true when entrepreneurship is linked to major economic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



shows a significant amount of interest in business ownership. Forty-three percent (43%) of those surveyed stated interest in owning a business in the future, and 12% of youth respondents already own businesses. Added to this, 44% 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



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.

Get to know and involve young people

Oftentimes, adult leaders make the mistake of thinking that they are able to represent the interests of young people. This issue is substantiated by the national survey data with 63% of youth stating that no adult has asked for their input about how to improve their hometown. Community leaders who 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 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 with 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.

Put 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:

- A school-based entrepreneurial career program, but few, if any, connections with the business community – youth experiences do not go beyond the classroom 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 good 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 each 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 with career pathways 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 employers to gain hands-on knowledge and experiences connected with local career opportunities.
- ✓ 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 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

We are now well into an entrepreneurial and networked economy where young people are able to choose where they want to live and pursue their entrepreneurial career goals. 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 young people, investing in developing their knowledge and skills, and creating the environment for them to be successful. If you seek to act upon this opportunity, the tools and proven strategies are available for you to be successful!



For more information and assistance in implementing a youth engagement initiative

in your community or region, please contact Craig Schroeder at

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Craig Schroeder grew up on his family's farm in Southwest Nebraska, and earned a Bachelors degree in Agricultural Economics at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1986. In 1989, after an early career in international Ag trade, Craig and his new bride, Dawn, a Los Angeles native, moved back to his hometown of 223 people and experienced firsthand what it is like for a farm boy to come home and a city girl to move to the country. This decision resulted an 11-year experiment in young adult recruitment and rural revitalization emerging from the eighties Ag Crisis. Craig's work during this period included renovating his former high school into a regional business incubator that supported the creation of over 7,000 jobs statewide in the past two decades through an initiative called GROW Nebraska, connecting creative rural entrepreneurs with urban and national markets.

Craig has committed his career to helping rural communities create more prosperous futures; working as a local economic developer, rural telecommunications policy leader, Executive Director of the Nebraska Rural Development Commission, Senior Fellow with the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, and President of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development. He has also served on several prominent state and national rural development boards and commissions during his career.

Craig's work extends across 47 states involving well over 45,000 youth, and in Canada, Australia and Russia, helping community leaders, educators and economic development professionals implement effective youth engagement, workforce development and entrepreneurship strategies. Closer to home, Craig created the Youth Attraction Formula[®] to help rural communities in the Great Plains set attainable goals for addressing chronic youth out-migration and population loss. In 2007, Craig was a contributing author for a textbook on entrepreneurial development published by Lexington Books. His work has been published in Great Britain as one of five content experts globally for a study by Youth Business International, in Russia for the national Parliament, and in a variety of publications in the United States and internationally. In 2017, Craig was inducted into the Nebraska Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame. To learn more, please contact Craig at craigschroeder@mac.com