Developing a Rural Renaissance Community Index: A Multi-Disciplinary Project with Research and Outreach Elements

Ann Marie Fiore  
_Iowa State University_, amfiore@iastate.edu

Linda S. Niehm  
_Iowa State University_, niehmlin@iastate.edu

Christopher Seeger  
_Iowa State University_, cjseeger@iastate.edu

Jessica L. Hurst  
_Iowa State University_, hurstj@iastate.edu

Daniel Russell  
_Iowa State University_, drussell@iastate.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Abstract
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Keywords
rural, development, RRCI, outreach

Disciplines
Community-Based Research | E-Commerce | Entrepreneurial and Small Business Operations | Fashion Business | Marketing | Rural Sociology

Comments

Authors
Ann Marie Fiore, Linda S. Niehm, Christopher Seeger, Jessica L. Hurst, Daniel Russell, Steven Garasky, and Sara J. Kadolph

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Ann Marie Fiore, Linda Niehm, Christopher Seeger, Jessica Hurst, Daniel Russell, Steven Garasky, and Sara Kadolph
Iowa State University, Ames IA 50011

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Background
Mark Drabenstott, Director for the Center for the Study of Rural America, has identified five factors that “will be critical in shaping rural economies in this century: tapping digital technology, encouraging entrepreneurs, leveraging the new agriculture, improving human and social capital, and sustaining the rural environment” (2001, p. 4). In terms of building human capital, Swenson and Eathington (2004), suggested that rural communities would greatly benefit from development, attraction, and retention of Creative Class individuals. The Creative Class (CC), a group rich in human capital, includes entrepreneurs and those paid to do creative work—“scientists, engineers, artists, musicians, designers and knowledge-based professionals” (Florida, 2002, p. xiii). To be competitive with more densely populated areas, rural communities (population under 50,000) must maintain and further develop infrastructural and lifestyle features (e.g., technology, education, diversity, unique lifestyle [retail] businesses, housing, and recreation) that have been purported to sustain and attract the Creative Class (Richard Florida, 2002) and professionals choosing to live in rural communities (“Marketer,” 2006; Spaulding, 2005). We have found no literature that identifies which features of rural communities are most important to the CC; research (e.g., Florida, 2002) on the CC has largely focused on attractiveness features of urban areas.

Purpose of Phase I: Multi-Functional Instrument Development
The main purpose of this project was to develop a multi-functional instrument to capture information about the relative attractiveness of rural community features, including retail offerings, to the CC as well as other prospective residents. The instrument was entitled, the Rural Renaissance Community Index (RRCI). This instrument was not only designed to provide the team of developers with pilot data for future funding proposals regarding rural economic development, but was also designed as an outreach tool for rural communities. The outreach tool had a two-fold purpose: (1) promote the infrastructural, lifestyle, and social features available within a community, and (2) provide data to community leaders for diagnostic purposes (i.e., identify most desired features of rural communities to inform development efforts). To accomplish both research and outreach functions, we developed a Website that included the interactive tool. The tool will collect demographic and residency data as well as allow site visitors (e.g., prospective residents) to rate the importance of community features in order to identify rural communities within the state that best match their specific needs. Site visitors may also select a community to identify its relative standing on these community features.

Method: Multi-Disciplinary Instrument and Database Development
The interactive tool allows individuals to rate the importance of 14 community features and 78 sub-features for 128 communities within the state. The included communities had a population less than 25,000 as well as a positive “economic pull” factor rating for the area and/or distinctive features that may be attractive to the CC (e.g., tourism features, artist community). This tool is linked to a database in order to identify the communities best meeting their needs.

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Whereas Textiles and Clothing scholars have a lead role to play in this project because of the potential importance of unique lifestyle (retail) businesses and tourism features to the CC, it was necessary to assemble a multi-disciplinary team to identify other potentially important community (sub-)features and sources of respective community-level data. The first two authors assembled a team including 11 other researchers from diverse disciplines (e.g., education, economics, hospitality management, landscape architecture). These team members had expertise related to community features purported to be important to the CC; as well as other features used in “best places to live” surveys; or found to be important through focus groups with students, community leaders, business leaders, and CC members in five rural communities. Some of the 14 features were: Educational quality; Health of the community; Leisure, tourism, and cultural opportunities; Local economy; Quality of life; Recreational opportunities; and Technology. Leisure, tourism, and cultural opportunities included sub-features such as the number of retail outlets, restaurants, bars, wineries, and museums. Federal, state, or organizational sources of secondary data were located for each of the sub-features. A database was created and linked to the interactive tool, which allowed the identification of the communities that best matched individual needs.

**Conclusions and Future Goals**

Understanding the bigger picture of what comprises and supports community appeal and vitality will arm community proponents with strong arguments for attracting new community members and businesses as well as retaining current residents. Such knowledge would also assist rural community organizations, schools, and businesses in program development, marketing, and management. Therefore, research and outreach efforts that assess and promote features of rural communities, respectively, are important. Phase II of this project will include data collection and analysis by a smaller team of researchers. The value of the RRCI is reflected in the cooperative arrangements with the state’s Department of Economic Development, the university’s Extension Service, and the College to include the Website link on their respective sites. Future goals include the development of a multi-state team of researchers to expand development of the RRCI to other states within the region, which is a necessary step for many federal grant opportunities.

**References**


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