

Through the lens of social capital, service-learning takes on greater meaning for rural youth, adults, and communities.

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A community development approach to service-learning: Building social capital between rural youth and adults

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SOCIAL CAPITAL BRINGS something new to youth and community development perspectives that has not yet been fully explained by other approaches. By shifting the focus from the individual to the community, social capital allows us to better understand the broad public value of education and youth programs. Because social capital is not age specific, it provides insights into cross-generational networks and connections that support building more inclusive communities. Social capital can help explain why some youth are more likely to get by or get ahead, why some adults are more effective within leadership roles or professions, and why some communities are better able to address poverty, bounce back from natural disasters, or seize new economic opportunities. In these ways, social capital can be a bridge between youth development and

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community development to help us better understand how the two are interconnected.

Using 4-H and FFA case study findings, we explore how community service-learning supports the building of social capital between rural youth and adults and the positive effects this has on community viability. Being involved in teaching, research, and extension at a land grant university, we come from our respective disciplines of rural sociology and agriculture education. Our aim is to better understand how rural 4-H and FFA youth engaged in community service-learning develop as leaders, transition to adulthood, and continue their civic engagement. We are also motivated by the future well-being of rural communities and what community service-learning may offer to youth practitioners who are working with a new generation of rural citizens, farmers, scientists, conservationists, and entrepreneurs.

Both 4-H and FFA have longstanding programmatic traditions rich in involving youth in community service and community development projects. Service is firmly grounded in the fundamental framework of the two youth organizations, as evidenced by the words that youth members recite at organizational meetings: “My hands to larger service” (4-H pledge) and “Living to serve” (FFA motto).

The two organizations have gradually transitioned from youth community service to community service-learning, linking youth service to school- or community-based educational goals, unmet community needs, and reflection to reinforce critical thinking and civic responsibility. The adoption of service-learning by 4-H youth programs and agriculture classrooms followed the broader pattern within K-12 educational reform.¹

For decades, cooperative extension agents working through 4-H and school-based agriculture teachers leading FFA chapters have been instrumental in forging school-community partnerships and brokering youth service for community development. Community service-learning has become a valuable collaborative method for involving students in community action, making headway on even some of the toughest issues facing rural youth and their communi-

ties.² Scholars have pointed to the potential for service-learning to change and even redefine relationships among students, teachers, and community members, yet building social capital has remained more a by-product than a goal.³

The rural context of community service-learning has largely gone overlooked within research on youth and community development, yet has caught the attention of some researchers who identify unique attributes of small-town life and rural areas. Rural communities characterized by geographical remoteness, sparse populations, and a limited resource base, yet rich in informal associations, cultural traditions, and an ethic of hard work and self-reliance, make the effects and impacts of service-learning more observable.⁴

Case studies of rural service-learning and civic engagement

We present case study findings from two studies: one in a rural Missouri community participating in the USDA Rural Youth Development program (RYD) through 4-H and the other from a sample of key school-based agriculture programs (FFA) in rural Missouri engaging youth in service-learning. The goal of this research was to build understanding of how bonding social capital is built between rural 4-H and FFA youth and adults through their involvement in service-learning or civic engagement activities. The results are part of a growing body of evidence showing that rural 4-H and FFA youth and adults around the country are building social capital and creating community change. We discuss several aspects of these programmatic structures that facilitate the building of bonding social capital and make recommendations on how these attributes can be replicated by 4-H, FFA, and other youth programs elsewhere.

4-H case study: Community service-learning in Lamar, Missouri

This case study sought to understand and describe the ways in which rural youth and adults built bonding social capital by working together on community service-learning projects.⁵

Located near the Kansas–Missouri border in the southwest corner of Missouri, Lamar, the county seat of rural Barton County, is the birthplace of President Harry S. Truman, where the family’s residence is on the State Historic Register and a draw for tourists to the area. Barton County has a population of 12,402 people, with 95 percent of the population Caucasian. Minorities make up less than 4 percent of the community population, with Latinos composing the largest minority population (2 percent). Nearly one-third of Barton County residents are under the age of eighteen, and 17 percent of residents are sixty-five years and over. Over 15.7 percent of the population lives below the poverty level.⁶

Qualitative interviews were conducted consisting of two focus groups with five adults and four youth and two individual interviews with one adult and one youth. Interviews were used to determine how service-learning projects are developing bonding social capital between youth and adults. Data were collected through nonparticipant observations as well. The adult interviewees consisted of youth and adult members of the RYD project core team, including business leaders and community officials. The youth ranged in age from middle school to upper high school and were active 4-H members in the community.

The case study results found that community service-learning projects were developing bonding social capital between youth and adults by providing opportunities for members to work closely together. As youth and adults worked together on projects over time, they strengthened community cohesion, a key component in bonding social capital.⁷

Moreover, the community’s path of service-learning activities over several years illustrated a spiraling-up effect, as youth and adults engaged in more complex projects built new levels of capacity to address the issue of poverty and received state-level recognition for their community betterment achievements.

FFA case study: Civic engagement in three rural schools

A collective case study of three rural Missouri school-based agriculture programs was conducted to explore the meaning of

community-based civic engagement activities through the lens of FFA chapter students and teachers.⁸ Students and teachers from the three schools were purposefully selected because they were regarded as outstanding chapters in terms of the number and variety of community-based civic engagement activities they offered.

The three schools were located in central Missouri in communities with populations of ten thousand or fewer and were largely rural in nature. The researchers conducted interviews with twenty-seven senior students who had participated in the civic engagement activities for the prior three years of high school. Interviews were also conducted with the seven adult agriculture teachers and FFA chapter advisors from the three schools. Students were nearly 50 percent male and 50 percent female, all Caucasian, and all from rural backgrounds. Teachers were mostly male, all Caucasian, from rural backgrounds, with four to twenty years of teaching experience.

Data sources for the study were hour-long face-to-face, semi-structured interviews of all participants; in-depth site observations at each of the three schools; and a reflective questionnaire sent to all of the students regarding their feelings about participation in FFA civic engagement activities. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all documents were coded for themes, subthemes, and representative quotes. Three major themes emerged from the data: student connections with the community and adults, authentic and transformational learning, and broad outreach.

Findings from the case studies

Both case studies illuminate five programmatic elements that facilitate the building of bonding social capital between rural youth and adults. These elements more broadly make up a community development approach to service-learning that youth practitioners and policymakers may apply toward the goal of building community social capital.

Youth and adult leader engagement throughout the process

The first characteristic is that youth and adult leaders become and stay engaged through youth-adult partnerships.

From the 4-H case, the Lamar community assembled a core team of youth and adults to develop and implement action plans to address a community issue over several years, in keeping with the RYD program framework. A mixed group of youth and adults participated in an initial project training led by a Missouri 4-H state team of youth and adults. The group chose poverty as their issue and began a new layer of partnership for Barton County 4-H, Lamar High School, and other local entities.

The core team planned and implemented a series of service-learning projects over the next two years aimed at alleviating local poverty. Projects included supplying basic needs items to local organizations serving low-income groups (sheltered workshop employees and domestic abuse shelter clients), teaching preschool children basics of money and financial responsibility, supporting low-income residents in planting a community garden, and organizing a community-wide food drive.

Several findings from the Lamar case supported youth and adults in becoming and staying engaged in the youth-adult partnership. For example, adult leaders initially presented the program opportunity to 4-H teens and let them decide whether to commit before moving forward. Second, adults indicated that the community would not be involved in the program unless the youth members were fully onboard. From the outset, this demonstrated a level of respect and trust in youth members and an understanding that a shared sense of ownership was critical for any subsequent actions the group would take. As a result of gaining buy-in from youth, the core team maintained a high level of youth participation throughout the process.

The Lamar core team also reached out to involve many different types of civic leaders and received a strong response and support from them. As long-time area residents and well-connected leaders within local networks, the local 4-H advisors were instrumental in helping the team engage city and county officials, agency

directors, and an area state legislator. Over time, civic leaders raised their awareness of how food insecurity and poverty were affecting the community, and agency directors discovered that youth care about the missions of their organizations.

Adult core team members understood that their role above all was to guide, encourage, and support the youth. Luce, a teenager who was part of the team, said she felt these actions contributed to the success of the group's service-learning projects: "With the support and encouragement from the adults, we were able to not only complete but successfully sustain each project." Melanie, an adult participant who was a business leader, noted that youth assumed more ownership for the projects by expressing and discussing their ideas and planning how to implement them. Adults gradually stepped back into less visible, less vocal roles in the background. She explained, "We're there, but for the most part we try and let them make the decisions how they want to do things."

Youth pointed out qualities the adults brought to the team that they highly valued. They agreed that adults brought knowledge of the community, the workforce, and the real world, and they strongly perceived adults as positive resources with real experiences and responsibilities. Louise, a teenage participant, said that as mentors and teachers, the adults supported her: "You can learn a lot from them. . . . We don't always know what to do, so that is why we have to ask them for help."

Moreover, youth gained insights from adults on the importance of professionalism, specifically teamwork, time management, and decision making. Luce said, "They [adults] have provided experiences for me to lean back on when I go out into the world. . . . They have taught me valuable skills that will not just prepare me for a job, but a career."

Case study results also captured that youth and adults felt more positive about each other after their interactions through the community service-learning projects and these stronger relationships helped keep them involved.

Louise said that her connections to adults grew over the course of the project: "I know I have met lots of people, through helping

with other projects, that if I needed to ask someone for help, I know I could go to them.” Other youth, like Alexandra, pointed to relational benefits that grew out of her project experiences and caused her to step out of her comfort zone: “I could go to them [adults] for anything in the project and didn’t have to be shy or anything.”

Many of the adults felt the partnership allowed them to understand youth on a new level. Melanie said that she had known young people only at an acquaintance level before the projects. But after working with the youth members on a community-wide food drive, she indicated she knows them on a more personal level now and realizes their importance to the community. She added, “The kids are more aware of who I am and who I represent.”

Another topic that surfaced was how the youth and adults overcame the dilemmas and challenges common to all youth-adult partnerships. Lucille, an adult, said that letting the youth plan was difficult for her at first: “I know they’re very capable, but I also want the program to be ‘successful.’” In the end, she reported having increased confidence in the abilities of the youth to accomplish anything they are given.

The biggest challenge the adults and youth had to overcome was use of technology for communicating with each other. At the beginning, adults preferred to call the youth by phone to inform them about upcoming meetings. They soon realized, however, that the youth preferred to communicate by texting or e-mail. After reaching a turning point, the adults realized they needed to use newer technologies to reach the youth, and the team’s communication improved. Atticus, one of the adults, explained that breaking through this communication barrier allowed both groups to better realize the potential of the other.

One of the unsolved dilemmas of the partnership was the dichotomy in how participants described “positive” and “negative” youth in the community. Adults and youth divided youth into “negative youth,” who lack manners, character traits, life skills, and motivation to become engaged community members, and “positive youth,” who are responsible, respectful, involved, possess favorable

character traits, and contribute to the community. Several of the youth thought that adults associated 4-H members and those involved in youth programs with positive youth. Louise explained, “I think being 4-H members, you are held to a higher standard. . . . If someone sees you out doing stuff that they don’t approve of then they would kind of disapprove of that more than if you are just a normal kid.”

The youth also believed adult perceptions depend on the peers with whom youth associate. Luce thought that youth are given more opportunities when they associate with more mature, respectable friends “who respect adults and therefore are given mutual respect in return.”

Many of the adults said that they worry about the future of the negative youth and wished the positive and negative youth could work together, but did not know how to get them involved. Sandra, an adult, attributed the community’s negative perception of some youth to their lack of mentors and role models:

Some kids want to be there, and they want to help and they want to be involved. . . . Then the other side thinks the adults are supposed to do everything for them. . . . They don’t want to take responsibility for their own actions or their own education or . . . their own lives. . . . It’s easy to do that when you don’t have the mentoring and role models.

Researchers note that bonding social capital can have a tendency to exclude community members who are not alike in some aspect, and therefore miss out on the closely knit connections formed by others. This dark side of social capital remains a dilemma for extending the benefits of community service-learning and civic engagement activities to all youth.⁹

In the FFA case, teachers and students attached significant meaning to the opportunity for youth to connect with the community and with adults through civic engagement activities.¹⁰ Students mentioned the value of establishing relationships with adults in the community, “forming a social network” with community leaders, and the opportunity to remove the common barriers to communication between youth and adults.

The adult advisors also indicated that by participating in chapter civic engagement activities, youth seemed to form a closer attachment to their community in general. Youth attitudes toward their community and connections to and concern and care for the community changed in positive ways. Students also indicated that through the positive interactions they had with adults in the community, they were able to create positive impressions about youth in rural communities. They noted with pride the compliments they received from adults for their efforts.

The final topic that emerged regarding youth connections with community and adults was the increased bonds formed between students and FFA advisors. Students indicated the power of connecting with their teacher in an environment outside school. They saw that their teachers were “passionate” about giving back and felt that by participating with them in the activities, they were bonding more than just through traditional classroom learning experiences.

Broad community participation through youth-led forums

The second characteristic involves youth and adult partners in gaining broad community participation, and their comments on their projects identify widespread community participation as a promising practice for teams leading youth and adults in community building.¹¹ The 4-H RYD is built on a community issues forum approach, which involves 4-H youth in leading community stakeholders in deliberative discussions about the issue they are addressing, the strategies they are using, and the action plans they are creating for community service-learning.¹²

The Lamar core team hosted its first youth-led community forum in 2011. The concept of leading a forum discussion was admittedly new for team members, and they were reluctant at first to take this step. Engaging the broader community seemed a daunting task, and youth lacked the skills and confidence to facilitate this type of meeting. With guidance from their 4-H adult advisors and the state core team of youth and adult members,

however, the Lamar youth successfully held a forum attended by thirty-eight community members.

The forum allowed youth to be in front of a room that was filled primarily with adults, some of whom had never met the youth or heard about the project. It gave adults a chance to see how well the young people worked with each other and with the community. Lucille indicated that she and the other adults were surprised the youth had planned and led the forum by themselves. Another adult, Marsha, said her first impression was that they seemed very mature, responsible, and confident. Subsequent forums that the Lamar core team youth led generated new ideas for projects to influence poverty, such as updating a community-wide directory of resources for low-income families and organizing a community task force on poverty.

Community issues forums and other participatory mechanisms move youth further outside the classroom, away from a single service site, and into the public sphere, where contact and deliberation with community members can form and strengthen ties between the generations. This step, which represents an expansion of the assessment stage of traditional service-learning approaches, has the potential to vastly increase interactions between youth and adult leaders in the community and therefore supports the formation of social capital.

Shared leadership for projects with high public value. The third characteristic of a community development approach to service-learning is shared leadership by youth and adults for projects with high public value. Public value, or the degree to which projects benefit nonparticipants, is a factor for consideration, as it raises the stakes on interactions between youth and adults. Having the whole community as the audience and recipient of projects (rather than a smaller, more targeted subgroup) creates a greater bonding effect between youth and adult participants. This is perhaps more often the case in rural areas where community service-learning projects like downtown park beautification are visible to the entire community and it is apparent that the entire community benefits. High public value does not necessarily imply

greater visibility of projects or greater risk for participants, although these factors, whether real or perceived, are also worth consideration. High-public-value projects might involve youth in learning and creating community history, informing the local community through media programs, stewarding the local environment, or conducting and presenting community-based research.¹³

In the Lamar case, the core team of youth and adults started addressing poverty by partnering with three local organizations on community service-learning projects: the Lamar Sheltered Workshop, the Good Samaritan Thrift Pantry, and Lamar Public Schools. These projects mostly involved the core team members themselves in charitable projects targeting a specific audience: sheltered workshop employees, abused women and children, and food-insecure children at school. The following year, the core team's efforts grew in scope to include more collaborative projects, including community forums, community gardening, preschool financial education, and a community-wide food drive. These projects involved youth and adults beyond the core team in more of a preventative, long-term approach to addressing poverty, resulting in higher public value.

A memorial walkway for a revered extension leader on the courthouse square was another project with high public value and close interaction between core team youth and elected officials. Youth partnered with city government officials to plan, design, leverage in-kind materials and labor, and install a brick walkway on one corner of the Lamar courthouse square. Although this project was not directly related to the core team's focus on poverty, youth and adults agree it would never have happened without the capacity built by the earlier community service-learning projects. For many participants, the walkway signaled a spiraling-up effect, reaching a new level of partnership of youth, adults, and local government officials.

When community service-learning projects are challenged to grow in scope, breadth, and depth over time, group work evolves into broader community efforts that result in greater bonding

between participants and produce higher public value than community service or traditional school-based service-learning.

Sustained focus on results and impacts over time

The fourth characteristic involves youth and adult team members remaining focused on addressing the same community issue over several years. In conventional approaches to service-learning, students are often involved in one-shot projects that are limited to one service activity or a string of service activities during one school semester, or practitioners may choose to facilitate service-learning projects that address several issues (such as hunger, environmental quality, and literacy) all in the same semester. While this shotgun approach may expose youth to a variety of issues and learning contexts, it does not offer the same in-depth relationship building with adults in the community.

Through the RYD program, rural communities implement community service-learning projects working on the same issue over as many as five years. Staying focused on one issue, like poverty, youth continue to work on projects, often with the same cadre of adult leaders, which supports growing deeper connections. In the context of small rural communities, youth and adults who often already knew each other on a limited basis expand their knowledge of each other, learn what they are capable of doing, and open up doors to collaborating on new levels. Layers of interaction and experience added between youth and adults facilitate knowing and being known in the community.

Along with sustaining focused effort over time, a community development approach to service-learning places value on involving youth and adults in participatory action research and evaluation. The Lamar core team used several evaluation methods to determine the impact that their community service-learning projects were having on team members and the community. Methods included leadership skills and project outcomes surveys, and storyboarding and spider-mapping activities from a national evaluation tool kit designed by states participating in the RYD program.¹⁴

Youth and adult survey results, and the spider-mapping activity in

particular, underscored the building of social capital between youth and adults. The use of reflection with participants, as well as with community youth and adults, is highly heralded by community service-learning scholars.¹⁵ Qualitative case study interviews with the Lamar team members also provided an opportunity for youth and adults to reflect on the skills and experiences they gained while working together, as well as how they think their work benefited the community. This served the purpose of strengthening the bonding relations between youth and adults.

The theme of broad outreach from the FFA case study focused on how participants viewed the unique programming structure of the civic engagement experiences in which they participated. Students noted that their FFA chapters had offered a wide variety of activities they could engage in and numerous kinds of community organizations and members with whom they could connect. Students also noted that the year-long involvement in a number of activities was an important aspect of their experience. Unlike some other organizations in which participation involved just one day or one weekend, their FFA chapters engaged them in numerous community-based activities throughout an entire school year and even over the summer.

This length of time they were involved contributed to what FFA participants identified as authentic and transformational learning as students discussed and advisors supported how students personally changed and transformed their thinking through participation in the community-based activities. Students highlighted that they had a new awareness of their community and the needs of people in the community. Many referred to their civic engagement experiences as “eye-opening.” Students and advisors noted that their perspectives changed from being selfish and singular to feelings of a broader connection among themselves and being part of something bigger than themselves through the civic engagement experience. They felt that they were making a difference through the activities beyond just giving money or performing a singular service. They felt connected, engaged, and aware in ways that they had not been prior to the experiences.

Community celebration and recognition of roles and contributions of youth

The fifth characteristic includes community celebration and recognition of the roles and contributions of youth. For service-learning to contribute to rural community vitality, communities must recognize youth formally and informally.

Informal recognition occurs when negative or indifferent adults gradually become more positive about young people by their statements and actions. From the Lamar case study, adult interviewees shared mostly positive opinions about young people in the community. Many said they believed communities grow and prosper only when adults take the time to invest in youth. Atticus explained, “When you invest in your youth, it’s not the money; it’s the time you spend with them that is rewarding.”

Media coverage is another way communities informally recognize the contributions of young people. Since the RYD program was announced in the local newspaper, the *Lamar Democrat*, the core team received extensive publicity, including numerous front-page stories and captioned photos of youth and adults engaged in positive activities. Formal recognition can occur in a variety of ways, such as involving young people in public decision making, recognizing youth through awards and scholarships, and rewarding youth with conference trips or other travel opportunities. With support from the 4-H adult advisors, several core youth served as representatives on the Barton County Extension Council, participating in the state legislative days, and helping give shape to 4-H and other extension programs in the county.

Lamar’s recognition from the Missouri Community Betterment (MCB) program was the most far-reaching for youth and adults alike. After years of not entering the MCB competition, a state-wide awards and recognition program for small communities, citizens were inspired by the core team’s work and submitted a portfolio of community improvement projects.

In October 2011, the community of Lamar received awards in the youth category and community population category at the MCB fall conference. A group of youth core team members and

the 4-H adult advisor attended the conference, where one youth also received an individual leadership award. Back in Lamar, the community hosted an awards ceremony and later a regional workshop and downtown walking tour, both of which integrally involved core team youth. The youth felt empowered by having their projects recognized by both the community and the MCB judges who had visited the community to evaluate their entry. Luce said, “It is truly empowering to hear from the community how proud they are of you and what you are doing.”

In 2012, Lamar entered the MCB competition again, including core team projects in its entry. At the fall conference, another youth core team member received an individual leadership award, the community placed first in the youth group category, and Lamar received the MCB Community of the Year award. Luce summed up how receiving this formal recognition from outside the community strengthened her sense of community belonging and her connections with local adults: “Having this bond and sense of community with other people makes projects and future relations so much more achievable, especially with adults. This club started as the ‘new kid on the block’ to an award-winning and highly respected community organization because of the ever progressing relationships we have made with adults.”

The recognition was reciprocal for the adults and the community as a whole. Adult leaders felt an increased sense of community pride and bonding with other adult leaders with whom they had collaborated. An adult who worked on the Lamar MCB entry commented, “The leadership group was praised and received awards for their hard work and amazing organizational effectiveness in their endeavors. Friendships and liaisons were formed that were not there before the project.”

Implications for youth development

Case study evidence suggests that rural 4-H and FFA youth and adults benefit from the bonding relationships formed through a community development approach to service-learning. Positive

community outcomes are noted as well in terms of increased community capacity and community recognition.

In the case of Lamar, when the 4-H core team participated in community service-learning activities, the community's level of civic engagement increased. This increased level developed community social capital as youth and adults made collaborative efforts to improve their communities. Community service-learning activities facilitated youth in developing social connections to adult community members, which increased their bonds and ties to the community and put them in a position to better use the resources in their community, while allowing communities to mobilize their youthful resources for problem solving.¹⁶

From the three rural Missouri FFA chapters studied, a number of important considerations were also noted. Civic engagement activities led students and adults in the community to form deeper connections. These activities resulted in mutual benefits between and among students, adult leaders, and community members. Civic engagement activities improved community members' perceptions of youth. FFA programming provided youth with sustained involvement in a breadth and depth of activities over an extended period of time, which resulted in much broader and deeper outreach experiences for youth. For students, these were transformative and authentic learning experiences that changed their perceptions about themselves, others, and their role in the community in ways superior to traditional classroom learning environments.

These results concur with other case studies that have shown that community service-learning can lead to the building of social capital, which can lead to the building of more social capital.¹⁷ When youth and adults forge trusting, closely knit relationships, social capital becomes an asset that both groups can draw on in the future, leading to a spiraling-up effect in the community.¹⁸

Recommendations for practitioners

Based on these findings, we propose recommendations for 4-H youth and community development extension professionals,

agriculture teachers, and other practitioners who work with rural schools and youth programs to reframe programmatic goals around how service-learning can support community development:

1. Prepare youth and adults to work together in partnership through service-learning. This may include equipping youth and adults to better understand and appreciate generational assets and differences. Training for adults should particularly address technology and social media skills to communicate with youth where they are, and skills for targeting and recruiting youth who are not visible leaders, whose potential has gone overlooked, and who may be viewed as negative influences in the community.
2. Move beyond one-shot projects involving one community partner organization and one service activity. Orchestrate more complex service-learning experiences for students in which youth service is integrated with multiple subject areas and involves interaction with multiple community partners.
3. Engage students in identifying the community issue to address, selecting the strategy, and designing the service-learning projects they will carry out.
4. Choose projects that involve students in service with high public value, in which the whole community becomes the audience for their work.
5. Ensure that service-learning projects involve ongoing contact and interaction among youth and city and county officials and other community leaders.
6. Support youth-led community forums or town hall meetings that connect youth with the broader community and gather input on the issue, strategy, and proposed service-learning projects. Youth-led forums are a new concept for many communities, and with adequate preparation, they can boost youth confidence and credibility and generate awareness and support from the broader community.
7. Recognize youth who are involved in improving community vitality with awards, scholarships, conference trips, and other

forms of public recognition. Create roles for youth on community boards and councils as positive ways for youth to continue leading and contributing beyond service-learning.

8. Organize school or community-based youth leadership development programs that immerse youth in the community and teach basic self-knowledge and skills for civic leadership. Leadership programs can work hand-in-hand with service-learning as a platform for civic engagement and a structure that supports the flow of capital between generations in the community.

Areas for further research

More research is needed to better understand the benefits of a community development approach to service-learning on other forms of social capital (such as bridging and linking), as well as to quantify what aspects of service-learning most determine the formation of social capital.

A more thorough quantitative investigation of the type, breadth, and extent of experiences on youth outcomes should be conducted, specifically, what kinds of activities have the biggest impact on youth and the members of the community and in what ways.

Further qualitative research is also needed to define and clarify the roles and the context of youth-adult partnerships, and to examine the rural context of community service-learning in more depth.¹⁹

Conclusion

The 4-H and FFA case studies we have presented illustrate the characteristics of a community development approach to service-learning that moves beyond one-shot projects to building and sustaining youth-adult partnerships to do collective work with high public value. Programmatic structures like 4-H and FFA offer

lenses for how this can play out in schools and communities. When practitioners are as attentive to nurturing relationships between youth and adults as they are to the activities carried out, the relationships that are built and the tangibles of service are products that carry forward for rural communities.

This phenomenon has implications for practitioners, whether concerned with narrowing the relational gap between generations due to technology, reversing brain drain, or revitalizing rural communities. Communities with greater cohesion between the generations will be healthier, more viable, and better prepared to tackle tough issues in a complex, changing world.

Seeing youth programs as builders of social capital can assist 4-H youth and community development extension professionals, educators, and other practitioners in fashioning programs that boost rural community viability. From this perspective, stakeholders can develop stocks of social capital available to rural communities while strengthening the value that communities and society place on rural youth.

Notes

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