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Capturing the Ripples from Community-Driven Business Retention and Expansion Programs

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Capturing the Ripples from Community-Driven Business Retention and Expansion Programs

Abstract

Community-driven Business Retention & Expansion (BR&E) is a time-tested University of Minnesota Extension program that is benefitting from a new evaluation technique—Ripple Effect Mapping (REM). This BR&E model helps communities create priority economic development projects. REM efficiently captures a community's project outcomes and impacts via community-based focus group discussions. REM results from four Minnesota communities showed the greatest number of effects in human and social capital, out of seven community capitals. For communities, completed ripple effect maps illustrate cumulative accomplishments while motivating participants to keep pursuing their project goals. For Extension, REM enables analysis for program reporting and improvement.

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Introduction

Describing the impacts of community-engaged Extension programs is essential for better programming, larger audiences, and public funding (Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009; Diem, 2003). It is also important to maximize community engagement by involving communities in evaluation methods that inform and motivate them (Patton, 2006).

University of Minnesota Extension's three-step Business Retention & Expansion (BR&E) model (Figure 1) represents a strategic planning approach developed by Morse (1990), with a number of revisions adapted due to feedback from local leaders (Loveridge & Morse, 1997; Bosma, 2007). Many states have adopted this model, and in Minnesota alone over 65 communities have completed the BR&E Strategies Program—investing substantial local time and program fees (University of Minnesota Extension, 2013). Extension also makes a substantial investment of educator time in each community BR&E. To justify these high investments, the evaluation results need to demonstrate a relatively high return.

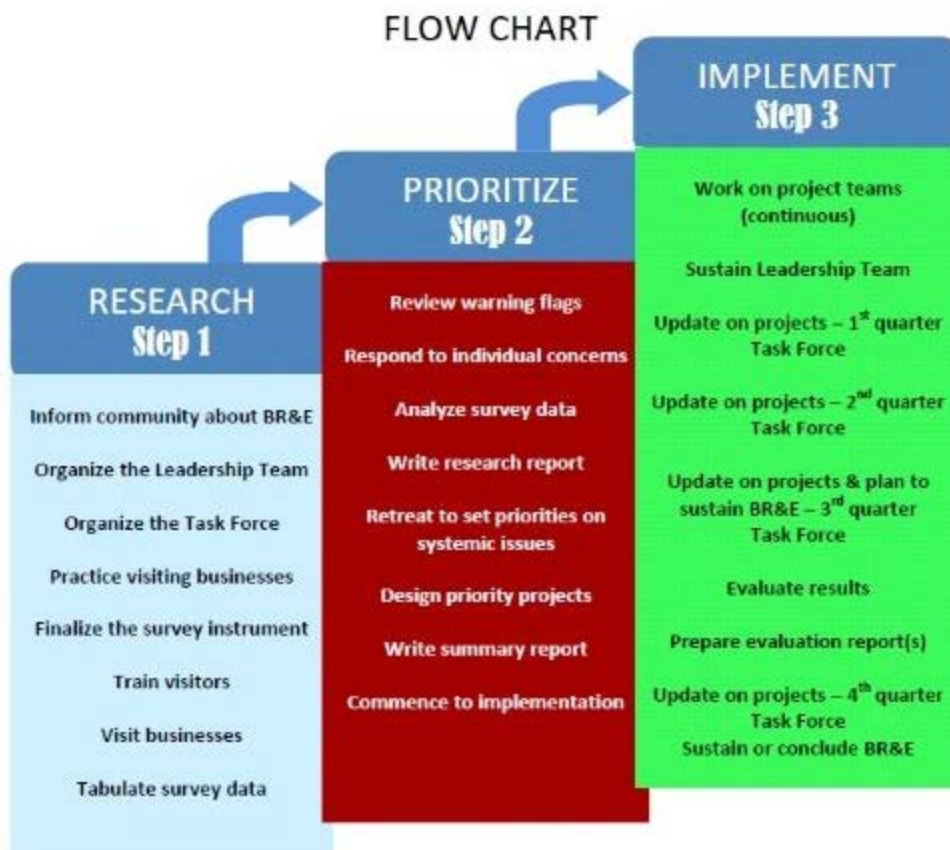
Since 1990, the effectiveness of this BR&E approach has been studied extensively (Loveridge, Smith,

& Morse, 1991; Loveridge & Smith, 1992; Smith, Morse, & Lobao, 1992; Loveridge, Smith, & Morse, 1995; Morse & Ha, 1997; Blaine, Hudkins, & Taylor, 1999; Morse & Lazarus, 2000; Bosma, 2007). Although these were valuable studies, they did not provide an evaluation technique that benefits both Extension and participating communities. A better way was needed.

We wanted a new evaluation technique for a legacy program—one that would display BR&E outcomes and impacts in a useful and easily digestible format for both the community and Extension staff. The new technique also needed to be easy to implement and help motivate communities. Until recently, such a method had not been identified.

However, in 2011 Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) emerged as a technique that fits these parameters (Kollock, Flage, Chazdon, Paine, & Higgins, 2012). REM features data gathering via focus groups with program participants. Using REM in the BR&E process is relatively inexpensive and conveys complex concepts in an understandable way. This practice also motivates community members to continue their efforts.

Figure 1.
Minnesota's Three-Step BR&E Approach



Testing in Communities

After receiving training in Ripple Effect Mapping, the Extension BR&E program team tested the REM approach with four Minnesota communities that participated in the BR&E Strategies Program

between 2009 and 2012: Hugo, Monticello, and Lyon County (including the city of Marshall), and Forest Lake. Focus groups were convened in each community over a breakfast or lunch setting, with groups ranging from four to 11 individuals. The overall BR&E leader in each community recruited focus group participants from the BR&E Task Force that sponsored the BR&E program. Although indirect beneficiaries of each community's BR&E effort were also invited, very few attended.

The focus group interviews were conducted in 90-minute sessions, using questions such as those in the Lyon County/Marshall script in Table 1. The Extension educator who worked closely with the community BR&E team usually conducted the interview, while the BR&E Program director captured the comments with mind-mapping software.

After the two Extension professionals edited the first draft of the ripple map, it was submitted to each community's overall BR&E leader. The overall leader's role here was to ensure that the draft REM document accurately captured the focus group's discussion. If additional edits or interviews were deemed necessary, this was done iteratively until a mutually acceptable REM was finalized.

Table 1.

Sample Questions from Ripple Effect Mapping of BR&E Projects

Note: These questions were designed to capture general outcomes and impacts.
Tell me a story about what has happened in Lyon County/Marshall as a result of the BR&E effort?
Is there anything you are proud to share from this effort?
What new resources or opportunities have become available in Lyon County/Marshall?
How has your attitude or behavior changed since participating in the program?
Did you make new connections with other people or organizations?
Were there any changes in your own skills and attitude?
Lyon County/Marshall adopted several priority projects [listed below]. What can you tell me about what has happened as a result of these projects?
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Host a Lyon County Business Summit 2. Strengthen local capacity to be more resourceful to businesses 3. Retain students, attract newcomers, and centralize communications 4. Improve retail trade, infrastructure, and tourism opportunities in Lyon County 5. Build Amateur Sports Center and expand the M.E.R.I.T. Center

Note: The following questions were probes to capture the community capital effects.
Were there changes in leadership roles in the community?
Did you make new connections with other people or organizations?
Have you seen any changes in aspects that preserve or enhance Lyon County and Marshall's natural assets, such as new or renovated parks?
Have you seen any changes in the built infrastructure, such as with roads and buildings?
Have you seen any changes in the local economy in terms such as jobs, wealth creation, or business profits?
Have cultural events and opportunities changed?

Results

Extension professionals analyzed the results using the Community Capitals Framework (Emery & Flora, 2006) to count various community capitals that were affected by BR&E efforts in each community. Emery and Flora (2006) identified seven community capitals (human, social, built, financial, natural, cultural, and civic). The casual observer would say that community BR&E programming is most likely to produce the greatest number of observed effects in either the financial or built capital categories. In fact, these are valid economic development goals in many situations.

However, when analyzing the four communities' BR&E ripple effect maps for observed effects, by far the most observed effect was in human capital—with an average of 64% of the total reported effects observed. Social capital (39%) and civic capital (36%) were the next highest reported effects. Note that some effects were categorized in more than one capital category—thus, the percentages add to more than 100%.

These results (Table 2) did not surprise BR&E program staff because the program recruits a broad-based group of individuals in community BR&E efforts. Involving nonexpert volunteers naturally increases attainment of skills and connections (i.e., human and social capital). Although some increases in financial and built capital were observed, these effects are more likely to occur over time as economic development efforts deepen and come to fruition.

Table 2.
Data Captured by Ripple Effect Mapping in Four Communities

Community Capitals as a Percentage of Total Observed Effects					
Note: Percentages add to more than 100%					
	Hugo	Monticello	Lyon County/ Marshall	Forest Lake	Average

Human	61	85	82	26	63.5
Social	29	52	47	28	39
Civic	49	24	53	17	35.8
Built	17	13	9	22	15.3
Financial	27	2	3	2	8.5
Natural	2	0	0	6	2
Cultural	2	0	0	2	1

Use of Ripple Effect Maps

All four communities subsequently used the ripple effect maps to document and communicate impacts of their BR&E efforts to the community and beyond. Two communities won international awards for their programs after drawing on the comprehensive outcome data captured by the REM to substantiate the breadth and depth of their accomplishments. Unsurprisingly, winning the awards helped inspire and re-energize program participants to continue BR&E projects. This helps community leaders sustain enthusiasm and continued progress on their priority projects.

Application of Ripple Effect Mapping to the BR&E process also proved beneficial to Extension staff. For example, REM results contributed qualitative and quantitative data for the Extension annual report to state and federal funders. The maps also opened doors to deeper anecdotal and case study analysis.

Conclusion

Ripple Effect Mapping is not designed to replace periodic comprehensive evaluation across a statewide program (Davis, 2012). However, REM provides a high-quality, hands-on evaluation tool for community BR&E projects, as well as other community engagement efforts. What's more, REM allows follow-up mapping opportunities with communities that sustain their BR&E initiatives. Potentially a series of maps could sequence results over time, while simultaneously contributing to sustained or increased involvement by community participants. It is hoped that periodic check-ins with BR&E communities will increase opportunities to both record their successes and encourage more.

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