First Impressions: An Effective Approach for Community Improvement

Kelly Nix
West Virginia University, kelly.nix@mail.wvu.edu

Daniel Eades
West Virginia University, daniel.eades@mail.wvu.edu

Robin Frost
West Virginia University, Robin.Frost@mail.wvu.edu

First Impressions: An Effective Approach for Community Improvement

Abstract

A long-term impact study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Community First Impressions Program. Thirty-two (32) targeted communities located in West Virginia and Pennsylvania were surveyed; 18 (56%) responses were obtained. The majority of communities reported the program led to positive changes in community and economic development. Impacts were realized beyond program recommendations as communities self-evaluated, built new networks, and sought additional resources for community-driven development. Government leader turnover and lack of funding and citizen initiative were cited as challenges. The findings have implications for community capacity building, specifically leadership development, resource development, and engaged citizen's strategies.

Kelly Nix
Assistant Professor
Kelly.Nix@mail.wvu.edu

Daniel Eades
Assistant Professor
Daniel.Eades@mail.wvu.edu

Robin Frost
Research Assistant
Robin.Frost@mail.wvu.edu

West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

Introduction

How individuals present themselves has a powerful effect on future opinions. As the old saying goes, "you never get a second chance to make a first impression." For first-time visitors, the way a community presents itself is of equal importance. The look and feel of the community experienced by a visitor will most likely influence how long they stay, if they will return, and whether or not they will speak about the community positively or negatively.

The West Virginia University (WVU) Extension Service views the Community First Impressions Program as an important tool in the community development process. The program draws from goals and processes of both traditional needs assessments (Watkins, Leigh, Platt, & Kaufman, 1998) and asset-based community economic development strategies (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003) to construct an inventory of both a community's assets and challenges that can be used to raise local awareness and guide public action from within. Although the spotlight is on outward appearances, the observations not only yield suggestions and project recommendations to improve aesthetic appeal and visitor experiences, but ideally stimulate discussion and the collaborative process leading to endogenous community development and an enhanced quality of life.

The First Impressions Program was developed by Andrew Lewis, University of Wisconsin, and James

Schneider, Grant County, Wisconsin Extension Service, in the early 1990s. Since then it has been adapted for use by Extension programs across the nation. The WVU Extension Service Community, Resources and Economic Development (CRED) Team adapted the program more than 10 years ago to meet the needs of West Virginia communities. To date more than 60 communities have participated.

The current process followed by WVU Extension Service begins with identifying community champions that make up the community leadership team. Anonymous visitors are then identified to conduct the assessment. These individuals are not affiliated or directly familiar with the location, enabling them to provide their unbiased impression of the community. Visitors use a manual of established procedures and guidelines to record their first impressions of seven community factors (Table 1). Many sites are evaluated; no individual establishment or entity is considered as a First Impression of the total community. Upon completion, manuals are returned to the faculty specialist for data entry and analysis. A final report is provided to the community leadership team, including all observations and comments. Photographs accompany the report to illustrate points raised by visitors. Results are presented to the community at large, and recommendations for improvement and asset development are included.

Table 1.

Key First Impressions Factors for Visitor Input

Factors	Components
Visitor Perceptions	Pre-visit and lasting impressions; sights and smells
Entrances and Signage	Visual appeal of community entrances; adequate welcome and directional signage
Business Areas	Downtown, strip malls, and industrial parks
Residential	Housing, educational facilities, community recreation, access to health care, diversity of faith-based community
Infrastructure	Streets, sidewalks, and benches
Tourism Assets	Existing resources; marketing initiatives and information
People	Welcoming and friendly

Problem Statement, Evaluation Purpose, and Objectives

Despite its long history and widespread use, there is little published research about the First Impressions Program's impacts. Shannon (2003) highlighted its role in Recruitable Community Program activities and credited the program as one component leading to the recruitment of 27 medical providers in seven communities. However, specific recommendations and initiatives that led

to provider recruitment were not addressed. Likewise, university program descriptions often indicate participating communities are eligible for follow-up consultation, but provide little detail about how the First Impressions Program translates into long-term use of services offered by Extension or other community development organizations.

The evaluation presented here documents the impacts of the First Impressions Program in West Virginia and surrounding areas 7 to 14 years after communities' participation in the program. The importance of evaluation in Extension programming is well documented (Duttweiler, 2008; Gruidl & Hustedde, 2003). However, Workman and Scheer (2012) emphasized the need for long-term evaluation with a special focus on "higher level" outcomes that extend benefits beyond program participation and enhance community well-being long after program completion. In line with their recommendations, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Extension logic model process (Taylor-Powell & Henert, 2008), the research reported here evaluated both short and medium-term actions from First Impression Program recommendations, and long-term, public value impacts of the program extending to the broader community development process.

Specific objectives were as follows:

1. Identify whether the First Impressions Program made an impact on the general condition of the community

2. Determine what program suggestions led to community improvements

3. Determine whether the participation led to other community improvements

4. Identify barriers that prevented the community from implementing suggestions

Methodology

Thirty-two communities were selected based on final report availability and sufficient duration (7 to 14 years) from the program visit for impacts to occur. Communities were located throughout West Virginia and one neighboring county in Pennsylvania (Figure 1). Surveyed participants included city officials, Extension agents, and community representatives. Multiple contact attempts were made; however, many communities experienced turnover in leadership between initial program visits and this evaluation. Overall, 18 communities produced a representative willing and/or able to complete the survey, for a 56% response rate. Data collected via telephone surveys included both open- and closed-ended questions chosen to quantitatively and qualitatively measure outcomes.

Figure 1.

Location of Surveyed First Impressions Program Communities, 1999-2005
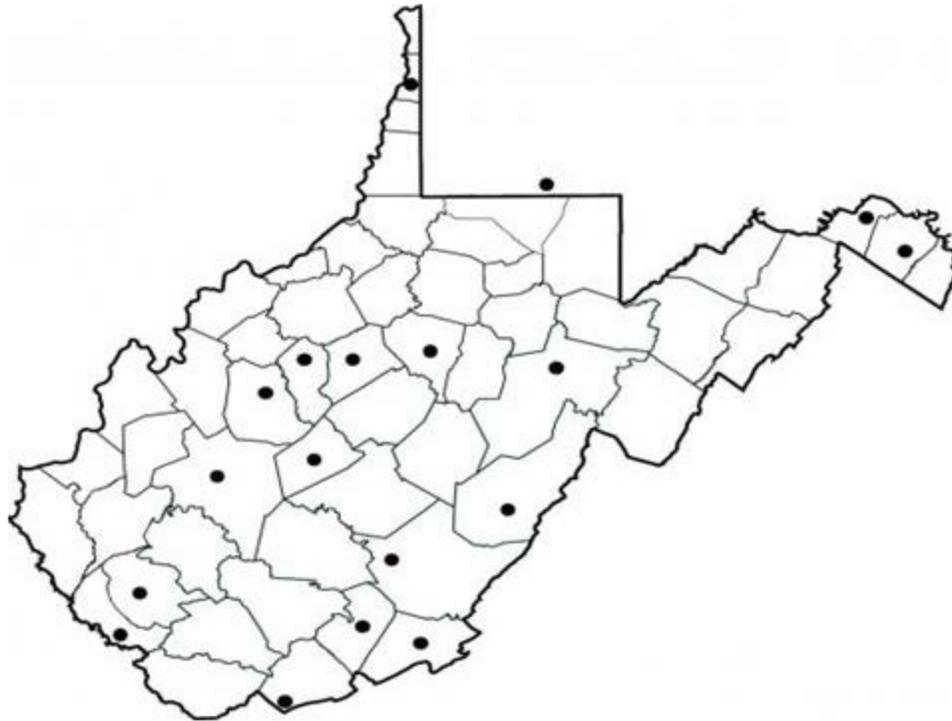
The majority of responding communities reported that the First Impressions Program led to positive changes in community and economic development conditions. Overall, 16 survey respondents (89%) reported beneficial impacts as a result of participation, and 12 (67%) reported that the general condition of their community had improved as a result of the program. Even those communities that did not report general improvements attributable to the program had implemented projects or initiatives specifically recommended in the report (Table 2).

Table 2.

First Impressions Program Suggestions Implemented by
Communities

	Frequency	Percent
Improved Signage	10	56%
Beautification	10	56%
Historic Preservation / Tourism Promotion	8	44%
Community Recreation	8	44%
Infrastructure Improvements	7	39%
Business Recruitment	6	33%
Increased Lodging	5	28%
Increased Partnerships	4	22%
Other	3	17%

No Program Suggestions Implemented	2	11%

The most common community improvements were to the built environment. These included adding or improving signage and community beautification programs (56%); improvements to historic sites and community recreation amenities and the promotion of these sites (44%); infrastructure improvements such as repairing sidewalks, the addition of benches, increasing Americans with Disabilities Act compliance, and updates to street systems (39%); and increased lodging to attract and retain visitors (28%).

Four communities (22%) indicated that the First Impressions Program spawned new partnerships. Examples included cooperative efforts between the community, state, and regional entities for beautification, tourism promotion, and regional economic development, as well as broader participation within communities.

Other community initiatives included business recruitment programs in five communities (26%), developing or expanding communities' Web presence in two places (11%), and the establishment of a farmers market in one community (6%).

In addition to providing an outsider's perspective, the First Impressions Program often resulted in new introspection and self-reflection by the community. As representatives from Wellsburg and Bluefield noted, the program "made everybody stop and look at the community" and was "one of the first programs to bring many [community] issues to light." As a result of the new self-awareness created by the First Impressions Program, nine (50%) of the communities reported impacts from other improvements emerging from the process though not specifically addressed by the First Impressions report. Projects were divided between increasing community visibility via tourism assets and opportunities, and initiatives encouraging community pride, such as aesthetic improvements, enforcing codes regulating property upkeep, and establishing community festivals.

Although communities were overwhelmingly successful in implementing at least some program suggestions, barriers to both project initiation and completion were common. Overall, 16 (89%) communities identified barriers that limited their ability to carry out improvements: 13 communities (72%) reported money and resources, five communities (28%) reported human capital and vision, and two (11%) indicated turnover in government leadership.

In many communities these barriers were overcome by engaging in partnerships with other state/regional initiatives and development organizations. Beyond the partnerships described previously, five (28%) community representatives indicated participating in West Virginia University's Community Design Team, a community-centered visioning, planning, and design process that matches university and private sector practitioners based on community needs; six (33%) participated in state and university downtown revitalization programs; and four (22%) were involved with broad community leadership and revitalization initiatives provided by state, non-profit, and/or regional financial institutions.

Seven communities (39%) reported actively seeking and/or receiving grants. Five communities (28%) received Appalachian Regional Commission/West Virginia Development Office Flex-E-Grants

providing between $3,000 and $10,000 per community for leadership and community capacity building programs. Two communities (11%) received awards from the West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center, which provided $5,000 and support for the rehabilitation of abandoned industrial sites. The ability to secure funding was a noted characteristic of those communities also reporting improvements in the general condition of their community.

Implications

The results of the First Impressions Program evaluation revealed positive outcomes from program participation. These included short- and medium-term outcomes based on program recommendations, such as improving the built/physical environment, increasing tourism and recreation opportunities, and establishing new partnerships to make projects possible. More important, the program's public value was demonstrated. Many communities recognized improvements extending beyond program recommendations to the broader community development process: communities began to self-evaluate, build new networks, and seek out additional money and programing resources for sustained community development.

In addition to revealing the success of the First Impressions Program, the evaluation highlighted opportunities for program improvement and identified issues that should be addressed by WVU Extension Service CRED faculty in conjunction with the First Impressions Program or through additional and/or future community programming. The lack of external funding, community vision and initiative, and turnover in leadership are challenges common to the larger community development process, and the First Impressions Program may play an active role in better addressing these challenges.

The First Impressions Program is often used as an entry point for the Community Design Team and Recruitable Community Program community development efforts. Increasing partnerships with other development groups, especially funding agencies already familiar with the program, could further streamline the development process and more easily connect the communities with monetary resources and specialized skill sets necessary for asset development project implementation.

Putting these resources to use requires multiple community champions and leaders willing to mobilize the community and follow through on program recommendations and future development projects. Where sufficient buy-in is not present, efforts focused on community capacity building is recommended before the program is undertaken. Such efforts could: (1) develop community leaders outside the local government, potentially minimizing turnover in project leadership; (2) provide the community a better understanding of local leaders' interests and affiliations, allowing the community to effectively recruit, place, and retain leaders in the most appropriate projects; and (3) provide multiple points of contact for program follow-up and future evaluation.

Recommendations

A First Impressions Program community forum for the sharing of ideas, successes, questions, and new opportunities would provide additional program evaluation opportunities and, over time, enhance the program impacts. The forum would provide obvious benefit to the participating communities, and would help Extension and partner organizations identify specific projects for focused community

coaching and follow up.

A future study could examine the role of the First Impressions Program and other service engagement programs' effectiveness in increasing faculty's understanding of the challenges facing rural communities. The results of the First Impressions Program evaluation indicate the program's success and highlight its usefulness in the community, resources and economic development field. The program is relatively easy to implement, and the observations and initiatives arising from the program have led to other community-driven development projects. Community, resources and economic development programs and other program units throughout Extension may find the program useful. Opportunities for program expansion should be considered, including adoption by other Cooperative Extension Services and the development of focused First Impressions Programs for specific community and regional assets, such as tourism resources and community events.

For more information on the WVU Extension Service First Impressions Program, visit http://cred.ext.wvu.edu/programs/first_impressions

References

Duttweiler, M. W. (2008). The value of evaluation in Cooperative Extension. In M. T. Braverman, M. Engle, M. E. Arnold, & R. A. Rennekamp (Eds.), *Program evaluation in a complex organizational system: Lessons from Cooperative Extension. New Directions for Evaluation* , 120, 87–100.

Gruidl, J., & Hustedde, R. (2003). Evaluation of capacity-building programs: A learning organization approach. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 41(5) Article 5FEA1. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2003october/a1.php

Kretzman, J., & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out* , Chicago, IL: ACTA Publications.

Mathie, A., & Cunningham, G. (2003). From clients to citizens: Asset-based community development as a Sstrategy for community-driven development. *Development in Practice*, 13(5) 474-486.

Shannon, K. (2003). A community development approach to rural recruitment. *Journal of Rural Health*, 19, 347-353.

Taylor-Powell, E., & Henert, E. (2008). *Developing a logic model: Teaching and training guide* . Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension, Program Development and Evaluation. Retrieved from: http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/pdf/lmguidecomplete.pdf

Watkins, R., Leigh, D., Platt, W., & Kaufman, R. (1998). Needs assessment: A digest, review, and Ccomparison of needs assessment literature. *Performance Improvement*, 37(7) 40-53.

Workman, J. D., & Scheer, S. D. (2012). Evidence of impact: Examination of evaluation studies published in the *Journal of Extension. Journal of Extension* [On-line], 50(2) Article 2FEA1. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2012april/a1.php