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David Civittolo

Ohio State University Extension, civittolo.1@osu.edu

Gregory A. Davis

Ohio State University Extension, davis.1081@osu.edu



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Strengthening Communities Through an Engaged Citizenry: Opportunities for Extension Programming

David Civittolo
Extension Educator
Medina County
Medina, Ohio
civittolo.1@osu.edu

Gregory A. Davis
Assistant Director
Community Development
Columbus, Ohio
davis.1081@osu.edu

Ohio State University Extension

Abstract: Research shows the level and quality of public discourse is a key factor in a community's ability to affect change. Recently conducted Extension research shows that a large proportion of residents do not feel engaged in community decision making. Extension works with a variety of community partners on a daily basis. Targeting programmatic resources in ways that would help improve the level and quality of public discourse could leverage the impact of the many Extension programs we conduct in cooperation with our community partners.

Introduction

According to Putnam (2000), the sense of social disconnectedness among Americans has been on the rise since the 1960s. As a result, community leaders have been facing difficult issues coupled with decreasing levels of public involvement in the decision-making process for the past 50 years. Furthermore, this disconnectedness has affected community capacity to affect change (Fear, Carter, & Thullen, 1985).

Social capital is created when residents and organizations engage in dialogue surrounding community issues. Such capital is the product of social connectedness or civic engagement and is a needed ingredient in working together in pursuit of common community goals (Foley & Edwards, 1998; Woolcock, 1998).

Research by Bacova and Maney (2004) indicated that when community residents are engaged in the local decision-making process, effective policy making, better-informed residents, and enhanced community capacity to govern are possible. Because Extension work focuses on developing the capacity of individuals, committees, and organizations to work together to accomplish goals, Extension is in an ideal position to

employ strategies necessary for building social capital (Warner, Hinrichs, Schneyer, & Joyce; 1999). Extension can also bridge gaps needed to bring together community groups and to consolidate various sources of social capital to focus on issues of both a local and regional nature.

To facilitate the development of social capital and enhanced civic engagement in communities, Extension has conducted programming involving local government officials, community leaders, residents, committees, and organizations. Such programs have focused on leadership, public issues education, and organizational and board development, for example.

However, to better leverage such Extension programming efforts, an engaged public is needed. How can we maximize our investment in community-capacity-development programming efforts? In what ways can we better target our programming efforts to foster a more engaged citizenry?

Improving our understanding of specific clientele needs is one of the critical first steps in effective program development (Birkenholz, 1999; Boleman & Cummings, 2005; Hudkins & Blaine, 1999; Nieto, Schaffner, & Henderson, 1997). This article makes the case that Extension has an opportunity and obligation to better target limited programmatic resources to facilitate increased civic engagement.

Purpose and Objectives

Using formal survey methodology to better understand the extent to which residents believe their community leaders regularly involve residents in making important decisions is one way to assess current program efforts as well as determine future program direction. In order to better target programmatic resources, the objective of our study was:

- To learn the extent to which Ohioans feel community leaders involve residents in making important community decisions.
- To identify differences in perceptions that community leaders involve residents in local decision making related to community development by educational attainment, political orientation, length of years in community, home ownership, and place of residence.

Methodology/Survey Design

Data were collected in 2006 by mail survey of 2,500 randomly selected Ohio residents. The Tailored Design Method was used, involving four contacts (Dillman, 2000). A total of 1,729 useable questionnaires were completed and returned, resulting in a response rate of 55%. Aside from the rate of home ownership, respondent characteristics compared favorably to known characteristics of the Ohio population.

Respondents were provided a 10-page, 141-item questionnaire. All but six of the items were of a fixed choice design. The focus of this article involves the following questionnaire items:

- Leaders of my community regularly involve residents in making important decisions.
- Please describe the kind of place in which you currently live.

- How many years of education have you completed?

- How would you generally describe your political views?

- Do you own or rent your current residence?

- If you own your current residence, what is its current estimated market value?

- How long have you lived in your current community?

Results/Discussion

Respondents were asked to share information related to their educational attainment; political orientation; number of years in the community; home ownership; and place of residence. Place of residence data enabled us to analyze responses by region.

To what extent do Ohioans feel community leaders regularly involve residents in making important decisions?

Overall, slightly more than one-fourth (26%) of respondents agreed with the statement, "Leaders of my community regularly involve residents in making important decisions." More than one-third (38%) disagreed with the statement and 36 percent had no opinion.

Table 1.

Agreement/Disagreement with the Statement: Leaders of my community regularly involve residents in making important decisions.

Variables	Agree Most	Agree Least
Location (region)*	Central Ohio	Southeastern Ohio
Location (self-described)*	Suburb	Farm
Home Ownership	Owners	Renters
Home Value*	Higher home values	Lower home values
Educational Attainment*	Highest educated	Least educated
Length of Tenure	Longer tenure (31-50 years)	Shortest tenure (<5 years)
Gross Household Income	Highest incomes	Lowest incomes
Political Orientation	Inconclusive	Inconclusive
* statistically significant p<.05		

Statistically significant differences were found when data were analyzed by respondent location. Central Ohioans (34%) agreed most with the statement, compared to 21% of Southeastern Ohioans. City and suburban respondents (29%) were more likely to agree with the statement than country and farm respondents (16%).

Other statistical differences were found in terms of home value and educational attainment. Respondents indicating higher home values (32%) were more likely to agree that community leaders regularly involve residents in making important decisions than respondents with lower home values (21%). Respondents indicating higher levels of educational attainment (28%) were more likely to agree with the statement than respondents with lower levels of educational attainment (20%).

Implications/Conclusions

Suburban respondents believed that community leaders involve residents in decision making more than respondents from cities, small towns, the county, or farm. Farm-based residents were the least likely group to share this opinion. This difference may be due, in part, to the nature and complexity of local government and quasi-government functions at the suburban level. Arguably, where more government and quasi-government activities occur, there are more opportunities for public involvement in related decision making. For example, suburban community leaders face a myriad of issues related to community services (community swimming pool/recreation center, arts/entertainment schedule, library policy, community improvement strategies, infrastructure, etc) in which to involve community residents. Relative to suburban communities, farm communities simply have fewer residents and fewer opportunities for engaging residents.

Furthermore, more populated areas tend to possess more governmental and quasi-governmental functions. In carrying out these functions, board, organization, and committee leadership holds official meetings, creates special task forces and committees, and communicates in a variety of ways with residents. Such activities provide more community leaders the opportunity to involve residents in community decision making.

While government and quasi-government activities are less complex in less populated areas, community leaders can look for ways to engage residents. Community leaders can encourage more citizen participation via regular newsletters, focus groups, surveys, advisory committees, and task forces. Extension programs involving community leaders should promote such activities as a way to better engage residents.

Respondents with higher home values agreed most with the statement "Leaders of my community regularly involve residents in making important decisions." More established (and affluent) residents are typically sought out for their opinion related to key community issues. These individuals typically serve on boards and committees and may also serve in an elected or appointed capacity. As a result, these individuals may be more attuned to community issues and the decision making process.

Similarly, respondents with higher levels of educational attainment are more apt to be sought out by local officials for input in decision making. Such individuals are likely to find themselves in positions of elected, appointed, or volunteer leadership as well.

Extension professionals can encourage our program-planning partners to cast a wider net when recruiting program participants. Targeting programs to more non-traditional clientele would help to build capacity of such individuals to serve in roles to which they may not typically have access. Doing so will require us to market programs in ways we have not marketed them in the past.

Finally, more than a third (36%) of respondents had no opinion. Is it possible that these individuals do not feel qualified to rate the extent to which they are involved by community leaders in local decision making?

Do they refrain from sharing an opinion because they are disenchanted with community leaders, entirely disconnected from the community decision-making process, or simply do not feel qualified to respond? As Extension professionals, we have opportunities to improve the level and quality of public discourse on a wide range of public decision making on a daily basis. Results from our study indicate a need for Extension to act on these opportunities.

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