

Hendricks, Minnesota: an asset-based cooperative learning experience

About the Project

There are two general approaches in sociology to community development—the problem-oriented approach and the asset-based approach. The problem oriented approach attempts to identify the cause of community problems and then implement policy and programming to address the root causes of a given problem or group of problems. The critiques of this type of approach are many. Financial and political control of policy and programming often exist outside of the community and for various reasons may fall out of sync with community needs. Success is dependent on many variables, some of which are highly localized, making it difficult to generalize from one community to the next. A community's past successes are important because they lay the foundation for the asset-based approach.

Asset-based community development is based on community success. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an asset-based approach to community development. There are two models of Appreciative Inquiry; the four I model uses four stages (1) *initiate*, (2) *inquire*, (3) *imagine*, and (4) *innovate*; and the four D model uses the four steps (1) *discovery*, (2) *dream*, (3) *design*, and (4) *doing*. In each model, the first step is to take an inventory of the things that the community does well and has had great success with in the past. The focus is not on problems, but on triumph, accomplishment, and achievement. The past of the community becomes interwoven with the future as prior local achievements reveal community skills and strengths, ultimately providing citizens an opportunity to then use these assets to create a better future. One key aspect of the use of asset-based community development is that there has been a focus on the incorporation of youth into the process. Some community development professionals maintain that the AI process is working well when a young person can ask an adult in the community “what is your vision for the future?” and the adult answers “you are.”

St. Cloud State University (SCSU) students participating in a senior seminar class in applied sociology visited Hendricks, Minnesota over the SCSU fall break, from October 11-13, 2012. The instructor of the course, Becky Freilinger, sought to provide students with a rural learning experience and at the same time empower the citizens of Hendricks through the identification of community assets as seen by young college educated people. College text book authors seldom include information about rural areas in their writings. When texts do discuss rural areas, rural life is often reduced to a text box insert on rural population loss or is addressed in some other cursory or marginalized manner. The instructor of the course also wanted to provide the citizens of Hendricks with evaluative feedback from youth who are on the threshold of deciding where they will settle after completing a four year college degree. Our field research was based on a platform of Appreciative Inquiry. The students were asked to identify positive things about Hendricks and the citizens of Hendricks were asked to show the students all of the positive things about the city. Our field research question was this: “What is the City of Hendricks doing well? “ Our hope is that the positive feedback we provide will initiate and contribute to conversations in Hendricks about imagining and dreaming the future.

Imagination is more important than knowledge.
-Albert Einstein

The Visit

While in Hendricks, our structured time included visiting Hendricks City Hall, the Hendricks Community Hospital Association, the Hendricks Public School, the Interstate Telecommunications Cooperative (ITC), and the Hendricks Senior Center. During unstructured time, the students toured the lake shore, played Frisbee-golf with youth from Hendricks, went shopping down town, and ate at local restaurants. Following are the collective appreciative evaluations of the six senior SCSU Sociology students who visited Hendricks.

The Citizens

Overwhelmingly, the number one asset discussed by the SCSU students participating in the project is the people of Hendricks. Comments included in the student appreciative inquiry evaluation of the citizens of Hendricks are consolidated in the following statement.

What is Hendricks doing well?

A person feels good while spending time in Hendricks because of the people there. People made us feel welcome in Hendricks and acted as if they enjoyed our visit as much as we did. The residents are kind and friendly. Mostly everyone in the community appears to be open to diversity. The people all know each other and interact as members of a close-knit community. People show a high level of trust in each other. Most citizens are involved in some type of formal or informal service to the community. Community engagement is often extended beyond the geography of the city to places such as Nepal and Haiti. The citizens are really creative—they allowed us to see life from many different perspectives. I would feel comfortable living in Hendricks because of the people.

Business

The business district was a pleasant experience for the students. One student fell ill and had to have another student drive him home early, so we did not get to visit all of the businesses, even though we had planned to visit each one. Following are positive comments made by students regarding the businesses they visited in Hendricks.

What is Hendricks doing well? The business owners are all really nice. They treated us as if they were happy that we were there and really wanted us as customers. It was great that some of the businesses provided internet access to their customers because this was the only way we found to access the internet. Main Street was not deserted like we thought it would be. If we lived here, we could work out because there is a gym on Main Street. The thrift stores were awesome. The bakery has such good baked goods that you have to get there early to make sure to get what you want. There is a hardware store and a lumber yard. The lumberyard will deliver the big things people buy there. There is a laundry mat. We did not think that there would be a chiropractor and a veterinarian. There is a convenience store that is open late at night. The food is good at the local restaurants. The city has an economic development council that helps people with starting businesses. The farmers market is really nice because you can get fresh food and it helps the small farmer. We would like to come back here to shop again. The restoration of the

creamery to develop a new business in an old building keeps the history of Hendricks alive.

Other Amenities

Some of the positive comments made by the students did not seem to fit into any of the other categories. I have called these “other amenities.” These may be similar to or even the same as ‘quality of life’ amenities that appear in the sociological literature discussing the reasons that urban people move to rural areas. The following are comments made by students regarding the other amenities existing in Hendricks.

What is Hendricks doing well? Everything is within walking distance. I can get mostly everything here, so there is no need to go to a big city except on rare occasions and this is good for the environment. The lake is really nice. I could go fishing at the pier. I enjoyed the Frisbee golf course. There is a nice golf course. People drive golf carts in town and that is good for the environment. The park and campground at the lake is a great place for summer celebrations like family reunions. I like the idea that there is very little crime. I do not feel afraid of crime in Hendricks. I do not need a security system in Hendricks. There is a library. Not using a cell phone for three days was peaceful. There is opportunity for socializing with other friendly young people. The churches have social functions for young people.

City Hall

The students toured city hall and spent time with the city administrator David Blees learning about Hendricks. Following are the positive things that students learned about the City of Hendricks.

What is Hendricks doing well?

Real estate taxes are more reasonable because Hendricks does not need city police. The garbage and recycling program work well and is reasonable in cost. The city administrator has worked in the urban corporate world and finds life in Hendricks to be rewarding and his job as city administrator challenging and interesting. The fire department personnel are all volunteers and the equipment is modern even though it is very expensive to have nice fire-fighting equipment. The city hall is available for social functions. The city is updating the sewer and water delivery systems. All of the yard waste is composted at a site outside the city, which eliminates the need to burn it and this is good for the environment. The city is mostly quiet and peaceful. It is impressive that a person can run for city council or mayor without spending a fortune on advertising. It seems as though the average person is able to have a great deal of influence on planning the future of the city because of the chance to participate in local politics.

Hendricks Community Hospital Association

The students spent time at Hendricks Community Hospital. Jeff Gollaher provided the students with basic information regarding community health needs, demography, history, and how the hospital plans for the future. Beverly Gillund, director of clinical care services, gave the students a tour of the complex and provided information on medical technology, cooperative health services, and the changing needs of the community. Following are the qualities that the students found to be community health care assets.

What is Hendricks doing well?

The hospital is actually a health care complex that provides a great number of services—far more in number than we expected. We thought the hospital would be small and provide very few services. The hospital is bright and cheerful and not dark and dreary like many urban hospitals. We loved the courtyard garden that was built by volunteers. We were all surprised that there was a cafeteria in the hospital where visitors can purchase food. We were very excited that the hospital publicity person, Christine, is an alumnus of St. Cloud State University.

The administrators are dedicated and creative. They have made it possible to offer far more services by crafting solutions through responsible financial stewardship and by using available cutting edge technology. We were surprised by the advancement of communications technologies in the medical field. In emergencies, the hospital is able to stabilize a patient's condition, and if needed call for a helicopter or ambulance, and communicate with the trauma center, so that when the patient arrives, the trauma staff in Sioux Falls can then immediately begin treatment without having to wait for tests that could cost the patient his or her life. We were taken aback that the hospital has digital mammogram technology because some urban areas are just now getting this. We liked the idea that the clinic, hospital, assisted living, and nursing home are all together. This cuts costs because they are able to share a lab and human resources. We did not think the complex would have its own lab. We thought they would have to send the tests out, which takes a long time and is expensive. It is admirable that the hospital administration has tailored the available health care services to the needs of the area's population demographic.

The administration's use of creative solutions to address the problem of the shortage of health care professionals is impressive. The use of paraprofessionals, like the nurse practitioner, eases the strain of currently having only one doctor. The idea that Hendricks is reaching out to immigrant doctors and has had success in recruiting new doctors to the area is commendable. We were impressed that citizens can access services like knee replacement surgery and oncological services in Hendricks because of the Outreach sharing program. We would have thought most advanced medical needs would require a trip to a big city. The Outreach program helps rural areas "share" specialists and it seems like there are quite a few specialists in the program already, with more in the planning stages. When we were planning to come to Hendricks our vision of rural healthcare was totally different than what is the actual case. Even the sole student from a small town found the Health care complex to be far more advanced than in her small town of 800 people.

Hendricks Public School

The students met with the school principal Dale Weegman, faculty, and staff to learn about education in a rural setting. Afterward we took a tour of the building and visited some class rooms. We learned that recently Hendricks Public School ended an agreement with a neighboring town and decided to become independent. Hendricks is now a pre through 12th grade school. This was a bold move in order to achieve local control of education. The citizens of Hendricks now have an excellent opportunity to construct an excellent education system. Following are the observations made by the students after learning about Hendricks Public School.

What is Hendricks doing well?

We were impressed that the citizens of Hendricks made such a courageous decision to be independent. This provides a great opportunity for Hendricks to create an excellent and superior school district. The principal, faculty, and staff are dedicated public servants who are willing to go to any length to provide an excellent education for every young person attending the school.

The school is clean and bright. We were told by the principal that many of the parents are very involved in creating a great school. The parents come to the school and volunteer their time in a variety of ways, including painting and decorating. They even purchased paint and other supplies for decorating the school. We think it is remarkable that the parents are so dedicated and involved. With community involvement like this, Hendricks Public School is well on its way to becoming the school that parents dream of for their children.

Since Hendricks was an elementary school for so many years, the transition to becoming a PK-12 school has been challenging. The school board, principal, faculty, and staff (and parents) have met these challenges in innovative and creative ways. Recent improvements in technology have allowed the school to provide high school students with online access to elective courses which would not otherwise be offered. High school students complete the work for these courses online Monday through Thursday and report to the school on Friday for one-on-one guidance and tutoring. The core courses are still taught in the class room. Interactive TV (ITV) delivery of classes is another option for unique college prep electives that are unable to be taught at the school due to financial restraints. The post-secondary educational opportunity (PSEO) program, a state-wide opportunity, allows advanced Junior and Senior high school students to attend college either in person or online and receive dual credit toward both their high school and college degrees. This is a great opportunity for motivated students to receive free college credits, while still attending high school.

The class sizes for all PK-12 courses are small, allowing for plenty of individual attention for each student. In urban schools, class size is a big problem, with many classes having from 35 to 40 students in each classroom, making it difficult for students to get individual attention. Small classes allow students to get out in the field more often. The science class, for example, has gone to the lake to collect laboratory samples and learn about the environment. We think this is a great way to learn—one that those of us who went to urban schools did not get. There is great opportunity in the math and science fields, so the more one can learn in these classes the better it will be for future student success in college and beyond.

Students are able to participate in a wide variety of sports. In a world that has a growing concern with obesity, we think this is a way to start a life-long habit of exercise, as well as to learn the social skill that are so necessary to success in college and in the work place. The FITT program is part of the regular curriculum where students are challenged to do exercise on a regular basis. Parents have been active in this area too. We were amazed that parents have bought and donated much of the sports equipment that is necessary to facilitate the school's participation in sports. This would never happen in the big city. The parents of the students are dreaming and imagining the future of the school in ways that we had never thought about.

The school is also developing a shop program that will help students learn practical skills that will be useful throughout their lives, even if they do attend college. When one is a home owner, there is always something that needs doing and having the skills to do some things on their own will save money in future home improvements. We found the principal, faculty, and staff to be very open to suggestions by parents and others with regards to extending the curriculum to include more and more opportunities to the students at Hendricks Public School. There are many things that money cannot buy and we found the stories about the parent's participation in the school district to be priceless. We hope they continue to be active and that new parents join them in Discovering, Dreaming, Designing, and Doing.

ITC (Interstate Telecommunications Cooperative)

The students met with Mark Van Eck and Jim Cannan from ITC. The student knew nothing about rural cooperatives or the reason for their formation, so I wanted to provide them with information regarding a cooperative. Hendricks has two rural cooperatives, ITC and Hendricks Farmers Elevator. We only had time to visit with one cooperative because fall break from SCSU was only two days, so I opted to have the students learn about ITC. I apologize for the brevity of our visit and hope that next time we can visit both cooperatives, since each was started to address totally different rural issues. Following are the positive comments students made about ITC.

What is Hendricks doing well?

We were surprised that there was a cooperative providing telephone, internet, and cable television. We thought the big corporations owned the rights to all of this. None of us knew that the big corporations were not really interested in areas without great population densities. We really liked the idea that the patrons earn credits by using the services of ITC. It made us feel that the company is more responsive to the needs of the consumers who use the services because the customers own it. We found the services that ITC offers to be in line with the services that we access in urban areas. We were surprised that the cooperative is so large. This is a benefit because it makes the prices more affordable. We found the price of services to be very reasonable. The support service is great in Hendricks with Mark being available to help people. The company also has a 24 hour help line for internet. We really liked the idea that ITC is helping people learn how to use the internet. Some older people have never used a computer. Some of our grandparents have learned how to use a computer and we all stay in touch that way. Our internet savvy parents, grandparents, and other relatives really like being able to keep up with us. ITC is building infrastructure that goes right to rural homes instead of just laying cable on the road. This is nice because sometimes getting the cable to the home can be costly and problematic. We thought that having high

speed internet access would make it possible for many people to move to Hendricks and not have to be tied to an urban area for employment. This is very positive because Hendricks is such a great place to live. We hope ITC keeps Initiating, Inquiring Imagining, and Innovating. Hendricks is far better off because of this cooperative's dedication to rural communities.

The Hendricks Senior Center

The senior center graciously invited us to eat lunch with them during our visit, so that the students could learn more about the activities and functions at the center. Following are the student's observations about their time spent with the Hendricks seniors.

What is Hendricks doing well?

The seniors are all very active and generous in their service to the community. They were all very welcoming and friendly. We were surprised that they serve a lunch every day at a reasonable price. They also deliver meals others who are not able to come to the center through the meals on wheels program. They have much wisdom to share with young people because they have lived long lives. We really valued their advice about how to make a marriage last and how to be a good citizen. These senior are a treasure to the community. They are involved in many things including helping people who are in need of food. They fund raise to make sure that the poor in the community have a holiday dinner. Many of the seniors are also members of the Kiwanis International service club that serves the children of the world and the Hendricks Community Foundation. We think they are AWESOME!

