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Using an Asset-Based Community Development Initiative to Attract and Retain Young People

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Abstract: An asset-based community development effort was conducted in Northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to attract and retain young people in an effort to reverse the region's decades-long population decline. Nearly 700 of the community's high school students, college students, and young professionals participated in a survey to identify the features of the community that its young people considered as assets. The grassroots, community-based Gogebic Range Next Generation Initiative collaborated with a number of community institutions to promote, strengthen and connect young people to these identified assets.

The Gogebic Range

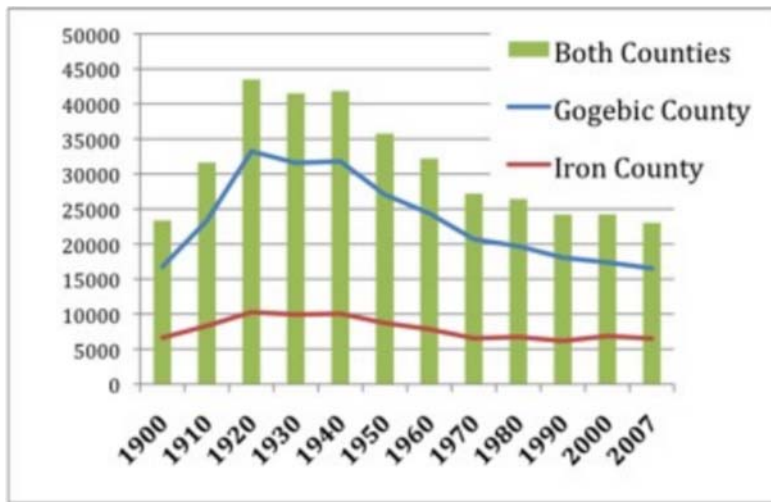
This article focuses on how a small community used an asset-based approach to attract and retain young people. Iron ore was discovered on the Gogebic Range of Iron County, Wisconsin and Gogebic County, Michigan (Figure 1) in the late 1800's, and its population boomed. When the mines started closing in the 1920's, its population declined (Figure 2) and aged (Figure 3).

Figure 1.
Gogebic Range Location Map



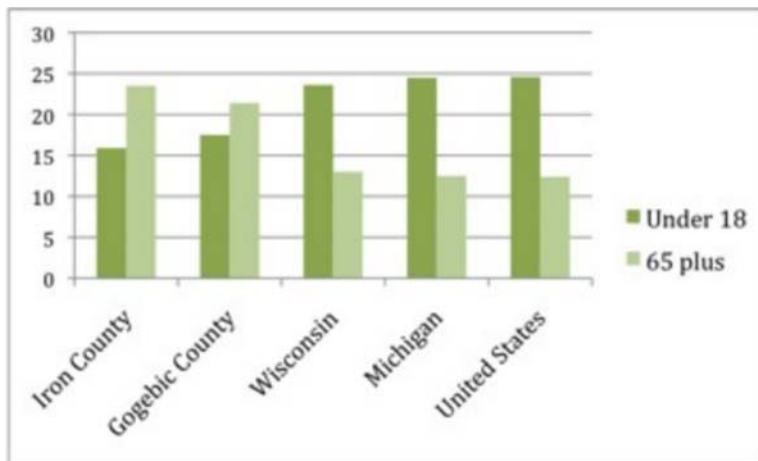
Matt Kures, UW-Extension

Figure 2.
Gogebic Range Population Trends



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (1995, 2007)

Figure 3.
Gogebic Range Population Trends



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2006)

Asset-Based Community Development

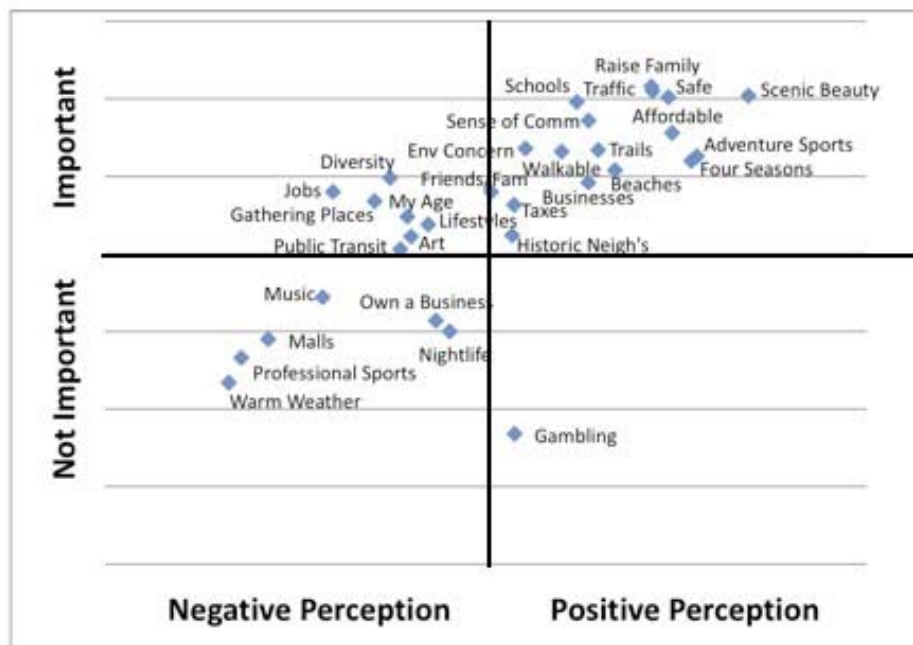
A strong body of research supports the efficacy of community development efforts that build upon the community's assets (Neito, Schaffner, & Henderson, 1997). In fact, some practitioners even incorporate asset building into the very definition of community development: "a planned effort to build assets that increase

the capacity of residents to improve their quality of life" (Green & Haines, 2008, p. 7). Such an asset-based approach was applied on the Gogebic Range in an effort to attract and retain young people.

"Wherever there are effective community development efforts, those efforts are based upon an understanding, or map, of the community's assets, capacities and abilities" (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 5). To help identify—or map—what young people view as the assets of the community, 668 high school juniors and seniors, college freshmen, and professionals under age 40 rated the importance of 31 factors for deciding where to live. Importantly, respondents also rated their perception of how well the Gogebic Range offered the same factors. The results were used to create asset maps for the Gogebic Range, displaying the 31 factors on both the "importance" and "perception" dimensions.

The asset map in Figure 4 illustrates the preferences and perceptions of young professionals who moved to the range from someplace else. This modeling provided excellent guidance for identifying the community's assets. Factors in the bottom half of the map are "not important." Factors in the upper left are "important" but perceived negatively. Factors in the upper right are "important" and perceived positively and are the focus of this asset-based community development effort.

Figure 4.
Gogebic Range Asset Map



Source: Gogebic Range Survey Results (2008)

Factors located in the upper-right quadrant are divided into two distinct groups. The first group relates to nature-based outdoor recreation factors such as scenic beauty, adventure sports, trails and parks, beaches and waterfront, and four seasons ("niche" factors). The second group relates to basic community components such as being a good place to raise a family, little traffic, safe, affordable, good schools, sense of community, concern for environment, walkable streets, service-oriented businesses, low taxes, and historic neighborhoods ("core community" factors). Considerable research indicates that these quality of life factors

are important community characteristics for people wanting to live in small towns and rural areas (Schuett, Jacob, Lu, & Respass, 2009; McGranahan, & Wojan, 2007).

Gogebic Range Next Generation Initiative

Asset mapping helped the community understand what features its young people considered as assets. This understanding led to the creation of the grassroots, community-based Gogebic Range Next Generation Initiative (NGI) to attract and retain young people. Over 100 interested residents of all ages collaborated with community-based organizations to better promote, strengthen and connect young people to the community's assets.

To better promote the range to the target market of young people living outside of the area, the NGI collaborated with four area chambers-of-commerce to create the Beautiful Northwoods Adventure website <<http://www.felivelife.com/>> promoting both the "niche" and "core community" factors. The website is being marketed through the distribution of 6,000 "Fe" ("Iron" in the periodic tables) European-style bumper stickers and Facebook <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/FeLiveLifecom/116514315029971?ref=ts>>.

To strengthen the "niche" factors, the NGI collaborated with local units of government to create a mapped vision for a regional, non-motorized trail system connecting all five cities located on the range. All 13 municipalities along the proposed routeâplus 19 additional community organizationsâpassed resolutions of support for this vision.

The survey showed that few high school and college students plan to stay on the range. One possible explanation is that, according to the survey, young people do not perceive the "niche" factors as favorably as their adult counterparts and therefore do not value living in the community as much as they could. The NGI collaborated with the local Extension office, school district, and community college to better connect the community's young people to the "niche" factors through service-learning projects and nature photography classes.

Conclusion

Early outcome measures document short- and mid-term changes in learning and action at the community level. For example, 78% of NGI participants surveyed stated that their perceptions of the community have improved as a result of their involvement, and efforts to acquire the necessary land for the regional trail system are already in process. Continued evaluation will be conducted to determine if the intended long-term outcome of reversing the community's population decline will occur. While additional research will be necessary, this asset-based approach shows promise for communities of all sizes.

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