



Lee County Community-Youth Development Program



The Issue

A major topic in rural community development is investment in local youth. Many rural youth struggle to decide whether to stay or leave their communities. Desires to remain tend to be related to family and community ties. However, there is a common perception that if youth leave their communities, their futures might be more promising (Bajema, Miller, and Williams 2002; Hektner 1995; Johnson, Elder, and Stern 2005).

Rural communities across the nation are therefore experiencing a “youth exodus” or, as referred to in the

vernacular, a “brain drain.” Rural youth are leaving their home communities once they reach adulthood and many are not returning (Johnson 2005). As rural communities age and populations continue to be “hollowed out”, there appears to be no present workforce or leadership pool ready to promote the continual development of the community (Carr and Kefalas 2009).

To accentuate this issue, rural areas face unique challenges including poverty, less diverse economies and labor markets, poor civic infrastructures, and limited educational and career opportunities (Hektner 1995). With no ready population



present to address these challenges, community leaders, practitioners, and policy makers are looking to solve this dilemma. The Community-Youth Development Program is one potential solution to the “brain drain” being experienced in rural America.

“Rural youth are leaving their home communities once they reach adulthood and many are not returning.”

The Solution: Programming and Partnerships

Rural people across Texas and the United States have been realizing the seriousness of youth leaving and not returning to their communities and have been discussing this issue at various venues and events for a long time. The staff at the Center for Rural Studies identified a need that needed to be met,

and in 2011, developed the curriculum for a Community-Youth Development Program (CYDP) as a part of the Center’s mission and services. The overall purpose of the Community-Youth Development Program is to educate youth on the functioning and operations of rural communities as well as engaging youth with the intent

of inspiring youth to remain in or return to rural America.

In late 2011, the Center approached the Giddings Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA) for partnerships in piloting the Community-Youth Development Program in the



Lee County Community-Youth Development Program

summer of 2012. Lee County was selected as the pilot site, and the cities of Giddings and Lexington have come forward and agreed to participate.



Giddings EDC and WSRCA have worked hard to secure funding, partnerships, and support for the program to ensure its success. Collaboration with the Giddings and Lexington school districts has also

been extremely beneficial to the project, particularly in identifying promising students and encouraging participation. Additional partnerships and support have come from: Giddings Chamber of Commerce, Lexington Economic Development Corporation, Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, Lower Colorado River Authority, and various businesses and organizations throughout the two communities.

Currently, twelve high school students have been selected from Lee County to participate in the inaugural Community-Youth Development Program. In order to be eligible for the program, students must be classified as at-risk and low income. This is a particularly unique aspect of the program as low competency youth have been shown to be “less connected with their community and more likely to express their intent to leave and not return” (Petrin, Farmer, Meece, and Byun 2011: 1091). The students will take part in a three-day summer camp hosted by the

Center for Rural Studies in Giddings; a four-week internship with a local business or organization; an exploration of community organizations, events, and businesses; and a shared community project. The Community-Youth

Development Program is comprehensive and inclusive. Applied education is encouraged to occur *throughout* the community—not just in specific projects or in limited areas—as youth interact with multiple sectors across the community (Perkins et al. 2001).

There is an “interdependent relationship between positive and healthy youth outcomes and positive and healthy communities” (Perkins et al. 2001: 43). The Community-Youth Development Program intends to engage “youth as partners in the development of external assets and in the development of opportunities for skill and competency development” (Perkins et al. 2001: 46). With the included training activities and through the community internship, youth will establish and build successful relationships with engaged adults. These relationships have the potential to provide social capital for the involved youth. The investment in the youth by the community not only promotes youth development but also promotes community development and “ensures the continuation of a healthy civil society” (Jarrett, Sullivan, and Watkins 2005: 42). Well-functioning communities have strong networks of trust; these

trust networks will be strengthened through youth-adult interaction within the program. Lastly, a new generation of youth will be integrated into rural and community civic life (Jarrett et al. 2005).

"When youth are connected in meaningful ways to their communities, they become the best of citizens. They see themselves in the everyday life of the village, and they feel that they can make a difference--that their actions matter to others." (Wilson, 2005, p. 97)

The CYDP involves creating opportunities for young people to connect to others, develop skills, and use those skills to contribute to their communities.



The Future: Continue and Expand

Through the many partnerships involved in this program, the Lee County Community-Youth Development Program goes beyond an ordinary workforce development program and serves as a community development program as well. It not only provides youth with necessary skills but also brings together youth and the community and the community itself.

It is the ultimate to desire by all involved parties to continue the Community-Youth Development Program in Lee County as an annual program. In 2013, the Center for Rural Studies hopes to expand the current reach of the program to other rural communities and youth in Texas.

For more information and updates on the Lee CYDP, please visit www.shsu.edu/ruralcenter.

The Lee County CYDP goes beyond an ordinary workforce development program and serves as a community development program as well.



*If it takes a village to raise a child,
how many children does it take to raise a village?*

Community Youth Development Journal, 6(4), 95-98.

A special thank you to Giddings Chamber of Commerce, Lexington Economic Development Corporation, Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, Lower Colorado River Authority, and various businesses and organizations throughout Giddings and Lexington who have partnered with the Center for Rural Studies, Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area, and Giddings Economic Development Corporation to make this program a success. Their support and investment in their communities is greatly appreciated.

