

The Transformation of Communities

Communities are always changing. In any community, levels of engagement and energy ebb and flow. During some periods, community development efforts might experience a sense of bubbling with activity rising to a new high only to fade away when the energy around a particular effort dissipates. A variety of factors contribute to this ebb and flow in communities:

- external funding or outside programs that stimulate community involvement but have that involvement fade away when funds run out or the program ends;
- local leaders who retire, become inactive for other reasons, or leave the community;
- community organizations or groups that form and then disband for various reasons;
- economic changes resulting from the arrival or departure of community businesses and employers.

As communities go through this bubbling and subsiding of energy, they experience transformation in many ways. For example, some Appalachian communities have moved out of the Appalachian Regional Commission's economically distressed category only to slip back into that classification. Other communities have pulled together around strong leaders then had difficulty maintaining momentum when those leaders retired, moved away or had to become less active due to family or health issues.

To sustain progress, communities need a critical mass of citizens, leaders and organizations working toward a shared vision of the future. To find an example of a community that has experienced the kind of sustained progress that leads to long-term transformation, we find ourselves looking outside the Appalachian Region.

The city of Tupelo, Mississippi, has served as a model for sustained community development, transforming from one of the poorest communities in the South to one of the most prosperous. If you ask residents of Tupelo how they achieved this, they will tell you that over several decades, a sense of culture had been established in the community, a culture with the expectation that people will work together for positive change. Effective community development values and builds on the capacities of all people. Leaders in Tupelo have worked to involve all sectors of the community in their development efforts. They have looked outside for ideas and inward for the resources and energy to implement them. They have made their investments over time and continue to receive a return on these investments.

Tupelo began to tip when people invested in the community and saw tangible economic benefits. They built structures to create a self-sustaining local development process. They built on the momentum, aligned the development efforts in the various sectors and experienced the success for which they are well known today.

When any community experiences a substantial flow of energy—when it is close to the tipping point—it can build on the momentum. By mobilizing a critical mass of leaders and citizens, the community can sustain its progress. The community must develop a plan for sustaining momentum and must provide an avenue for training new leaders who will work to continue the process of transformation. These investments will strengthen the community's approach to ongoing positive transformation.

Brushy Fork Institute Community Transformation Program Description

Brushy Fork Institute's Community Transformation Program (CTP) will serve as a catalyst to help a community build on its momentum at the tipping point, then develop a plan for sustaining the momentum and provide an avenue for training new leaders who will carry forward the work of transforming the community.

Selection of a community will result from a collaborative dialogue between Brushy Fork and local leaders about capacity, readiness, energy and timing. To be selected for the program, your community should demonstrate the following:

- local leaders' vision and commitment to carrying their community through the program;
- ability to garner the involvement of key community leaders for a core team of 15 members;
- willingness to invest \$50,000 in the program; and
- ability to recruit several project teams.

In essence, we are looking for a community that has enjoyed some accomplishments and has a strong sense of possibility: a community that is at the tipping point. Because every community is different, the CTP will be customized to the community's situation.

A Flexible Program Design

The Community Transformation Program is an intensive, long-term process that includes training opportunities for local residents, community improvement projects and strategic planning efforts. When a community joins the program, a core team of leaders will partner with Brushy Fork to implement the program. Members of the core team will represent various sectors of the community, for example: economic developers, local entrepreneurs, businesses and banks, community agencies and nonprofits, youth, the school system, elected officials and volunteers. The core team members should be decision-makers who have enough knowledge of their sector to recognize challenges and opportunities and who have enough influence to address these challenges and opportunities. The core group will serve as facilitators and a driving force for tapping the energy around various sectors in the community and for pulling together efforts in these sectors toward a shared vision.

The program will include the following elements:

Training

The core team of leaders will attend the Brushy Fork Annual Institute on the campus of Berea College, where they will gain hands-on skills and unique perspectives related to leadership and community development.

Other citizens in the community will participate in workshops on leadership development and project planning that will take place in the county. Brushy Fork staff will lead these workshop sessions. As an outcome of the in-county workshops, the participants will undertake projects as described below.

Community Projects

The core team will recruit and organize community members to take on multiple, diverse community improvement projects. These projects will be in the various community sectors, such as health care, youth, education, economic development and recreation.

Strategic Planning

The community will engage in a strategic planning process that will build on existing strategic plans and connect to the community transformation process. The strategic plan will address all sectors of the community and serve as a unifying force for community development efforts.

Leadership Development Infrastructure Assessment

Brushy Fork staff will work with the community to assess the existing programs and opportunities that increase local leadership capacity. Where gaps are identified, the community may implement new, local programs to train emerging leaders. Brushy Fork will provide technical assistance for program design.

Leveraging of Internal/External Resources

The community will explore other resources that are available and will partner with Brushy Fork to identify ways to increase their capacity to leverage these resources. Such resources might include business loans, internship programs, foundation or government grants or other training programs.

Community Transformation Program Expected Outcomes and Benefits

A community will see its investment in the Community Transformation Program pay off in both short-term and long-term outcomes. The community will be able to achieve the following:

Short-Term Outcomes

1. Increased leadership skills for the core team through participation in the Brushy Fork Annual Institute;
2. Increase leadership skills and project planning skills for members of the project teams, through the in-county workshops;
3. The completion of a range of successful community projects;
4. Mini-grants to be used for implementation of the community projects;
5. The development of a community-wide strategic plan that unifies efforts among the various sectors of the community;
6. Identification of benchmarks to measure community progress.

Long-Term Outcomes

1. An increase in the number of citizens involved in leadership and community development;
2. The development of strong networks of leaders in the community;
3. Increased capacity to leverage internal and external resources;
4. Increase in the “sense of possibility” in the community;
5. Increase in social capital in the community resulting from trust and respect among residents;
6. Movement of community toward meeting benchmarks that measure progress.

To Learn More

To learn more about the Community Transformation Program, contact one of the Brushy Fork staff members below:

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