ABSTRACT
What are the components of a healthy community? How can we determine a community’s readiness for special projects and initiatives? These questions were raised by our research team as we explored ways to understand and improve civic engagement in rural communities.

Our ongoing work with communities has led us to believe that their strength rests on the relationships people have with one another. Social capital research agrees, showing that communities with a strong foundation of trust between and among different individuals and groups are healthier, thrive economically and educationally, and are more likely to take action to improve their community. On this premise we designed our assessment project, Our Community Assessing Social Capital, to engage individuals in the research to study social capital (trust, engagement and connections) in their community.

Our report will share the results of five years of research including literature searches, pilot tests in 10 rural communities (n=3,200+), and statistical analyses to determine the reliability and validity of a survey tool which collects information about bonding, bridging and linking networks. Our research has led to the development a “community assessment guide” which supports the use of our survey tool.

The research process, involving community members trained to reach out to a diverse cross-section of the community to gather data and stories, has lead them to identify ways they can strengthen the networks in their community and then assimilated into “action steps”. Current research is focused on how the engagement process builds community ownership in taking action.

Assessment Process Overview
Our community assessment process has been designed to engage people in looking at the social capital (the relational foundation of a community consisting of trust, connections, and involvement) in their community.

The Our Community Assessing Social Capital assessment process has eight steps which can take anywhere from 3-6 months to complete. As its title suggests, this process requires the community to provide leadership for completing the survey which will identify areas where the community already has a strong foundation (strengths to build on) as well as areas they may want to strengthen (priorities for action). Survey reports provide information on three types of networks (bonding, bridging and linking) with a close look at trust and engagement within each network type.

The table on the following page is an overview of our eight step assessment process for engagement communities is assessing their social capital.
# Our Assessment Process

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<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Roles</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Team Formation</strong></td>
<td>Identify and organize a Community Project Team that will carry out the survey data collection and guide the assessment process.</td>
<td>Extension Educators work with community to identify 5-7 individuals to form the team.</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Community Planning</strong></td>
<td>Determine the boundaries of the community to be assessed, develop plan to reach a cross-section of the community to complete the survey, select survey methods, identify volunteers for data collection, and develop promotional strategies.</td>
<td>Extension Educators facilitate planning conversation(s) Community Project Team makes planning decisions (with coaching and worksheets provided by Extension)</td>
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<td>3. <strong>Training Volunteers</strong></td>
<td>Community volunteers are trained to understand the assessment effort and secure completed surveys.</td>
<td>Extension Educators provide training</td>
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<td>4. <strong>Data Collection and Analysis</strong></td>
<td>Community volunteers follow their plan for distributing and collecting surveys from individuals in the community. Once the surveys are collected the data is entered and analyzed.</td>
<td>Community Project Team distributes/collects the survey, then returns them to Extension. Extension research team provides preliminary report to Extension staff.</td>
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<td>5. <strong>Community Awareness</strong></td>
<td>The community stimulates interest in social capital for widespread awareness while the data is being analyzed.</td>
<td>Extension Educators support community efforts for presentations, news media, or other awareness activities.</td>
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<td>6. <strong>Data Presentation</strong></td>
<td>The Community Project Team previews the data from the survey which suggests community strengths and areas for focus.</td>
<td>Extension staff members provide preliminary report presented to Community Project Team for feedback.</td>
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<td>7. <strong>Community Meetings</strong></td>
<td>Meetings are held to engage individuals and groups throughout the community for data review and discussions about improving their community.</td>
<td>The Community Project Team determines best way to engage people.</td>
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<td>8. <strong>Community Action</strong></td>
<td>Plans for “next steps” in the community are incorporated into the final report which is a tool for their future work.</td>
<td>Extension research team prepares final report to leave with the community. Community members take responsibility for action!</td>
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NOTE: A variety of materials including *Community Glue* (DVD/VHS program and discussion guide), *Social Capital and Our Community* (publication), information and data presentations, and *Results and Insights for Action* (community reports) have been developed to support the assessment process. See the U of M Extension U-Connect Program website [http://www.extension.umn.edu/U-Connect/](http://www.extension.umn.edu/U-Connect/) for examples.
Overview of the Research Purpose and Methodologies

What are the components of a healthy community? How can we determine “community readiness” for special projects and initiatives requiring the engagement of community members? What is it that will “make or break” a community's efforts to take action? These were just a few of the questions raised by the program team as we were developing our business plan and focusing our work on civic engagement. These questions, along with requests from community groups and organizations to help them get a clear picture of what their community was “really like” led to a literature search.

**Literature Search:** (August 2002, initial search…and continues still in 2008!)

Our literature search focused us on social capital, the relational foundation of a community consisting of trust, connections and involvement. The current research showed that communities with a strong foundation of trust between and among different individuals and groups thrive in many ways (i.e. economically, educationally) and are healthier (Flora et al., 2004; NCRCRD, 1999). In the search we were unable to locate surveys or assessment tools that would measure social capital in rural communities. So, our team chose to pursue this by contracting with a consultant (YellowWood Associates) using program development grants to enhance our work by developing a tool.

**Development of Survey Tool:** (February 2003 – November 2006)

Our intent in conducting the research was to create a survey tool that would adequately measure “social capital” as described in the literature. The assessment tool developed through our efforts was designed to measure community indicators in nine areas as supported in the current research: 1) norms of behavior, 2) safety, 3) trust-efficacy, 4) trust-general, 5) networks, 6) inclusion and exclusion, 7) bridging and bonding, 8) diversity and sameness, and 9) personal civic engagement. Once the newly developed survey, based on expert-validation and relevant research, was completed we needed to field-test the tool and analyze the results to assess its reliability and validity. The goal of the assessment was to measure the protective factors that exist in communities.

**Pilot Phase I:** (January 2004 – February 2005)

Materials (fact sheets and discussion guides) were developed to engage community members in determining the data collection methods they would use. An application was made to the University’s IRB (Internal Review Board) to assure appropriate methodologies and then 30 volunteers were trained to distribute the assessment to a wide range of community members and gather the information for analysis. A total of 406 usable assessments from three communities (2 in NW Minnesota / 1 in NE North Dakota) were used for the data analysis (provided by Shanna Ratner with YellowWood Associates) in this first phase of testing the assessment.

**Pilot Phase II:** (November 2004 – June 2006)

The questions and format of the assessment tool were reviewed and modified prior to its use with our next round of data collection in communities. Materials were revised and 25 volunteers in SW Minnesota were trained to administer the assessment tool. In this phase of the pilot Ben Winchester and James L. Gambrell from the Center for Small Towns (U of M Morris) did the data analysis on 960 assessments from three counties (Nobles, Rock and Pipestone).

**Reflection and Redesign:** (July 2006 - present)

Once an adequate number of surveys had been administered in Pilot Phases I and II, research staff at the University of Minnesota Morris conducted a variety of statistical analyses to determine the reliability and validity of the survey -- from which we learned and are moving forward on the following:

**Focus on Reliability** - the degree to which a survey and its components are consistent from one application to the next. NOTE: Because the survey had scales to measure nine aspects of social capital, correlations were conducted to determine if each of these scales was internally consistent. The internal
consistency was strong for eight of the nine scales, but weak for the scales pertaining to bonding and bridging networks. Since the measurement of bonding and bridging networks was vital to the validity of any measure of social capital, the reliability tests suggested that revision of the survey to include more items pertaining to both types of networks was necessary.

**Focus on Validity** - the degree to which a survey actually measures what it purports to measure.

- **Face validity** means that participants view a survey favorably and believe that it is measuring what it sets out to measure. *FYI: Participants responded well to the social capital survey and felt it was a good measure of the social fabric of their communities.*

- **Content validity** is strong when a survey adequately covers the range of meanings of a concept. *FYI: The social capital survey had strong content validity, except there were an inadequate number of items pertaining to bridging and bonding networks.*

- **Criterion (or external) validity**, whether the survey results were related to other outcomes to which they should be related, was determined by examining the relationship of survey responses to a set of items related to crime. *FYI: The results of this analysis were mixed. The selection of crime-related variables for use as the criterion may not have been as good a choice as a measure related to health because there is a growing body of literature relating social capital to positive health outcomes.*

- **Construct validity** – a more theoretical notion about whether the survey actually measures social capital – assessing this is the most challenging and will be ongoing. *FYI: Many of our survey items were modeled after existing validated social capital surveys. More attention to bridging and bonding networks brought the survey closer to the theoretical literature on social capital. The updated survey included a classic validated sociological scale that measures local vs. cosmopolitan orientation – responses from this scale were used to further validate the survey items (local orientation should be highly correlated with strong bonding trust and networks; cosmopolitan orientation should be highly correlated with strong bridging trust and networks).*

Our research team reviewed the social capital literature and examined our conceptual model. Based on our findings we then modified our model to include the concept of linking networks and narrowed our focus to two aspects (trust and engagement) within each of the three network types (bonding, bridging and linking). We also revised our survey to better reflect our conceptual model.

**Pilot Phase III:** (November 2007 to present)

We are currently wrapping up the pilot of our current assessment process and survey tool in four Minnesota communities. In this phase of our research we set out to determine if:

1) factors related to trust and engagement (in each type of network: bonding, bridging and linking) would emerge from the data in support of our conceptual framework. *FYI: A factor analysis of our revised survey strongly supported the validity of our six scale approach to measuring social capital.*

2) by engaging volunteers in the assessment process we could outreach into the community to obtain a “representative sample” (based on community demographics). *FYI: Each community encountered different barriers to gathering information from different sectors in the community.*

**Next Steps:** (October 2008 to August 2009)

The next phase of our work will be to: 1) compile our research, tools, and methods for engaging community members in “assessing their community” into a Community Assessment Guide, and 2) use our survey instrument to conduct a random sample to compare “sample representativeness” between methodologies.

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Literature Bibliography (available upon request)