CARE-ing for Rural West Texas: Conducting a Needs Assessment to Support a Community-Engaged K-12 Education–University Partnership

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Abstract

The success of outreach hinges on whether programs are authentically rooted in the needs and strengths of a particular community. Here, we describe the process of conducting a needs assessment intended to provide this foundational information. This needs assessment, conducted by boundary spanners from a large public university, focuses on the needs of rural K-12 educational settings in West Texas. The article describes how the needs assessment shifted as we reflected on our initial attempts. It also highlights how the use of an assets-based framework enabled the team, as boundary spanners, to highlight community resources that can be leveraged for the design of future outreach and engagement efforts.

Keywords: rural education, K-12 education, teacher shortage, needs assessment, engagement

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This report describes community-engaged scholarship uniting the K-12 education systems of rural West Texas with Texas Tech University with the goal of better serving Texas children. As we—an interdisciplinary team of university-based scholars and practitioners—have begun this work, we have become boundary spanners (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) committed to assets-based views of rural communities (Crumb et al., 2023) and unwavering in the stance that engagement is a two-way approach to partnership rather than a one-way delivery of services (Stanton, 2007). Here, we focus on Phase 1 of this partnership in which we are conducting a needs assessment. Needs assessments are regularly used in fields such as medicine when it is necessary to assess the status quo within an organization (e.g., Sata et al., 2022). In education, needs assessments are used to understand the challenges that exist, as well as the forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that can address those challenges (Bryk et al., 2015; Pade-Khene, 2012). Although needs assessments are common, this report differs from many needs assessments in that it describes how the project's goals were sustained but the specific processes were altered as we conduct-ed the initial stages of the needs assessment, reflected on varying degrees of success, and experienced a change of leadership at the level of the dean's office. Our long-term goal is to use the needs assessment findings to leverage university resources for outreach programs to support rural West Texas K-12 schools. Thus, this Project with Promise provides a model for those embarking on outreach and engagement efforts, especially within the reality of ever-changing university leadership.

Review of Literature

The difficulty of attracting and retaining qualified teachers and administrators to rural schools is well documented (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Leech et al., 2022; Reading et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2017; Wargo et al., 2021) and persistent (Foght, 1912; Gray, 1916). In 1910, Henry Dewey described rural schools' challenges as a

> lack of carefully trained and ex-perienced teachers, short terms of school, poorly constructed school-houses, insufficient equipment, annual or semi-annual change of teachers, enrollment too small for

best results . . . teachers not in touch with life of community, and community not vitally interested in the schools. (Dewey, 1910, p. 542)

Many of these challenges remain today. Typically, university-based teacher education programs do not provide content specific to the needs of rural students, so it is common for teachers to lack knowledge of rural communities and rural pedagogy (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Leech et al., 2022; Wargo et al., 2021). Rural schools, like schools across the United States, increasingly serve emergent bilingual students (Lee & Hawkins, 2015; Lichter, 2012) and students of color (Marrow, 2011; Means et al., 2016), but rural teachers are underprepared to meet their needs.

Some of the issues noted by Dewey (1910) have taken on new forms in contemporary schools. For example, "insufficient equipment" now includes a lack of access to broadband internet with streaming speeds necessary for video content (Karnopp, 2022). The lack of material resources is compounded by the fact that rural schools cannot benefit from economies of scale in the same ways that large urban school districts do (Thomas et al., 2011; Urban Institute, 2021). For example, if a speech therapist is required for a single student, a district must provide one (Berry & Gravelle, 2013). Such a requirement burdens rural school budgets, which are already funded at rates disproportionately lower than suburban and urban districts (Leech et al., 2022; Reading et al., 2019; Strange et al., 2012).

Although some challenges of K–12 rural education remain unchanged, we dispute that in rural education settings, the "community [is] not vitally interested in the schools" (Dewey, 1910, p. 542). Agger et al. (2018) have demonstrated the importance of rural families in their children's educational attainment. Rather than familial disengagement, the underlying issue is that community engagement is often constructed as one-way (Isserman, 2005; Stanton, 2007), rendering the commitment to education that rural families hold less visible to university-based stakeholders. To highlight the voices of those who live and work in rural communities, and to act as boundary spanners (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010), we have begun by conducting a needs assessment alongside these deeply invested stakeholders to create a two-way flow of support.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that underpins the needs assessment is one that extends critical models of cultural and social capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005). The rural cultural wealth model, which is rooted in Yosso's groundbreaking work on community cultural wealth, includes four components: (a) rural resourcefulness, including the capacity to overcome sociocontextual adversity; (b) rural ingenuity, including the inventiveness to respond creatively to need; (c) rural familialism, including lineages of intergenerational care; and (d) rural community unity, which refers to the composite assets of rural community. Crumb et al. (2023) noted that they "do not suggest that grit, bootstraps, or a positive attitude remedy ensconced inequities. . . . We do, however, suggest that rural people have agency which rural education scholars and practitioners should amplify" (p. 128). We see Crumb et al.'s emphasis on assets over deficits combined with their emphasis on remediating inequity as providing a foundation to our community-engaged approach.

The Needs Assessment

Prior to beginning the needs assessment, we secured Institutional Review Board permission and defined the goals of this project.

Goal 1: Determine the community assets and strengths on which K–12 students, their families, their teachers, and their administrators already draw in rural West Texas schools.

Goal 2: Determine what additional supports and resources (i.e., programs, partnerships) the university collaboration can provide to improve academic and economic outcomes in rural West Texas schools.

In addition to defining the goals of the needs assessment, it is important to define what constitutes success. Our criterion for success is that our results must indicate some assets and needs that have not previously been identified through our review of the existing literature, which highlights general trends and thus points to generic solutions. This criterion is important, since it would also suggest that the needs assessment's findings enable us to plan outreach and engagement efforts that would align with the university's strategic priorities, especially a goal to "increase and strengthen collaborative, mutually beneficial community partnerships that stimulate creativity, innovation, and

social and economic development" (Texas Tech University, 2024, p. 12). Our aim is to use this needs assessment to identify a set of clearly outlined programming priorities specific to the needs of rural West Texas.

Defining the Location

One methodological consideration when conducting a needs assessment is defining the target context. Our partnership focuses on rural West Texas. To operationalize the region of West Texas as a location for research purposes, we chose to engage with the communities on and west of I-35, a north-south highway that divides the state. Although "West Texas" may seem like an ambiguous designation, it has a distinct cultural memory informed by the unique geopolitical history of Texas (Flores, 2002) and the agricultural and geological wealth of the western Staked Plains (Spearing, 1991) that shapes the local relationship between rurality, schooling, and culture (Panos & Seelig, 2019).

Defining Rurality

Defining the study's boundaries also required us to define rurality itself (Isserman, 2005; Koricich, 2022). Various scholars (e.g., Manly et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2011) have challenged the trend of defining rural by what is lacking, such as distance from a city center, rather than what is present, such as a sense of community. Here, we use a pragmatic definition of any district that only has one high school, and where school leadership consider themselves rural.

Our Boundary-Spanning Team

The contributions of each team member are essential to connecting university-based scholars with community members. First, our team includes the dean of the College of Education, who acts as an internal engagement advocate (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) by holding space for the project, thus reflecting the value of community engagement back on the College. Midway through this needs assessment, we experienced a change of deans. However, including a leader at the dean's level in the project remains essential to its success. Following Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) typology of boundary spanners, university faculty serve this project as technical experts: One of us holds expertise in designing instrumentation; another holds knowledge of teacher preparation and taught in rural K-12 schools. Our team also includes a (semi-)retired rural K-12 administrator who acts as a community-based problem solver, and a development director who takes the role of an engagement champion by defining pathways for individuals interested in providing meaningful support to rural schools. Three team members have deep familial ties to the West Texas area; two team members do not. Figure 1 depicts the original needs assessment team.

Figure 1. The Original Rural West Texas K-12 Needs Assessment Team

Note. From left, Dr. Catherine Lammert, Dr. Mihwa Park, Mr. Shawn Mason, Dr. Kallie Covington, and Dr. Jesse Perez Mendez.

Identification of Participants

Brown and Lambert (2013, 2015) suggested that a typology of individuals from five distinct categories should be considered in needs assessments: (a) key individuals, who are those most closely related to the topic at hand; (b) affected communities, who are secondarily impacted by the decisions key individuals make; (c) specialist advisors, who include community leaders who wield influence; (d) influential organizations such as community organizations, clubs, and boards; and (e) holistic thinkers, including anyone who might offer an insightful perspective. We used this model to determine who to invite to participate in the needs assessment. Table 1 shows our participants organized by Brown and Lambert's (2013) typology.

Data Sources

Next, we developed a focus group interview protocol based on the rural cultural wealth framework (Crumb et al., 2023). It includes an assets-based question for all attendees: What aspects of your rural community do you take the most pride in? Then, participants join one of three groups: teachers, administrators, and staff who work in K–12; family members/caregivers of students; or community members with broader interests (e.g., Chamber of Commerce members). The aim is to maximize the potential for dialogue to emerge "as a confluence of varied perspectives on similar experiences" and to "[surface] visible connections between and among constitutive social, cultural, and political structures and forces" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 40). Accordingly, the questions increase in criticality but maintain an assets-based stance.

Initial Recruitment of Participants

To begin, we held thirteen listening sessions in fall 2023. Each session was held at a regional Education Service Center in a hybrid format, permitting participants to attend via Zoom or face-to-face as they preferred. To support shared understanding between all participants, the focus groups were led by a faculty member who is an experienced rural K–12 teacher and the (semi-)retired community-based problem solver (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Our college's communications team advertised these sessions using traditional and social media.

Early Challenges and Successes

In our initial focus groups, we met with 37 participants from various rural school districts who have fallen mostly into the key individuals (Brown & Lambert, 2013) category, including principals and superintendents. They have ranged from those with 5 or fewer years of experience ($n = 5$) to those with 30+ years of experience ($n = 3$). Most reported that they live in the rural communities where they work, although some ($n = 8$) reported that they commute.

In reflecting on this first step, and in comparing our outcomes to our success criteria, we realized that by holding focus groups at the Education Service Centers during

Table 1. Rural West Texas K–12 Needs Assessment Participants

Invitee knowledge category (from Brown & Lambert, 2013)	Participant groups in the current study
Key individuals	K-12 teachers, administrators, and support staff; Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) boards, school boards
Affected communities	Families, caregivers, and parents
Specialist advisors	Civil service (firefighter, police, librarians); City Council Members; Chamber of Commerce; local co-op boards (e.g., electric, internet, phone)
Influential organizations	Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions Club, Shriners, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Salvation Army, Native American organizations, Latinx organizations (e.g., Chicanos Por La Causa)
Holistic thinkers	Clergy

business hours, we made a structural decision that prioritized the voices of key individuals (Brown & Lambert, 2013). Although these individuals' views matter greatly—they are called "key" for a reason—we also recognize that the perspectives of superintendents and principals do not necessarily reflect all community members. Furthermore, in spring 2024 we experienced a change of leadership at the level of the dean that added a new perspective to the project. As a result, two additional 50-minute focus group sessions were conducted with teachers (*n* = 36), most of whom were also parents of children in rural schools, in the summer of 2024. To facilitate turnout, we held these sessions as part of a College Connect Conference, an opportunity to earn ongoing education credit that teachers were already attending.

Initial Findings

Goal 1: Understanding Rural Schools' Challenges and Strengths

Our initial descriptive coding of the transcripts from these focus groups (Saldaña, 2016) suggests a variety of challenges faced by rural communities, including uncompetitive salaries and lack of suitable and affordable housing. As one participant explained, "It's [a teacher's] market," suggesting competition is fierce. However, results also suggest that rural communities are learning to leverage the assets they have by making sure job candidates know what rural life has to offer, including smaller class sizes, shorter commutes, and a sense of belonging. A superintendent described the imperative that "we have to sell *culture*." In selling rural culture, leaders are advocating for the resources and personnel they require.

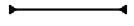### Goal 2: Identifying Possibilities for Collaboration and Programming

In our study, the most common request made by rural school leaders was for improvements to rural residencies and student teaching placements. Whether they described paid residencies, in which those learning to become teachers of record serve as support staff in schools, or unpaid student teaching placements where teacher candidates spend time learning with a mentor teacher, rural school leaders had seemingly endless ideas for ways our university could better partner with them. Since this goal is only partly met at this time, we envision supporting rural teacher residencies and other initiatives in Phase 2 of the project.

Limitations and Potential Next Steps

As we consider those whose perspectives we have captured and those we have not, we recognize the need for a survey that would permit access to an even broader range of invitee knowledge (Brown & Lambert, 2013). We developed the Community Assets for Rural Education (CARE) survey following an asset-based approach, aiming to learn insights from rural communities (Emery et al., 2006). To this end, items were created to address four rural cultural wealth components (Crumb et al., 2023). The survey also includes demographic information questions to ensure respondents will represent the economic, cultural, and racial diversity of rural communities in West Texas, and can be available in Spanish. However, a current unresolved challenge is how best to distribute the survey to ensure a strong response rate. This survey is intended to reach individuals such as recent graduates of rural high schools, their parents/families, and additional community groups. To this end, we have strategized to administer the survey online through collaborations with local school districts and educational service center offices.

Conclusion

Rural K-12 schools have suffered from the negative views held by those in suburban and urban settings more often than they have from a lack of parental engagement from within (Agger et al., 2018; Manly et al., 2018). By beginning with a needs assessment rather than with programming based on preconceived ideas about rural K-12 schools, we use this work to begin to remedy this long-standing problem of public perception. Although needs assessments are sometimes conducted without theoretical frameworks (Pade-Khene, 2012; Sata et al., 2022), we argue that grounding our examination of rural school *needs* inside a stance toward rural school *strengths* provided us with a guidepost to follow as we interacted with community members. We have thus provided a tentative model for how outreach and engagement partnerships can be constructed in the preliminary stages to ensure success.

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