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Community Capitals: Cultural Capital

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural capital consists of symbols and language, festivals, celebrations, and events. Cultural capital is our shared identity, things that make us feel like a community.

Cultural capital gives each community its own distinctive character. Many communities have festivals celebrating their heritage and events and common community themes. Cultural capital is also formed when communities live through historic events together: for example, the Midwest in the “Dirty ‘30s” or a New York neighborhood following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Cultural capital is part of our identity, our traditions, and our understanding of each other. Cultural capital can be framed by common occupations such as farming and ranching. Cultural capital can also be related to a common attitude: for example, Midwestern people are typically categorized as having strong work ethics and “can-do” attitudes. Everything that shapes our lives—our families, our spirituality, our history, and our ethnicity—is part of our cultural capital.

CULTURAL CAPITAL AS A RESOURCE

Cultural capital can be used as a resource in the form of museums and historical societies that help to preserve history and also attract people to visit the community. Recall that community capitals are

interconnected: communities undertaking Main Street revitalization projects with historic storefronts are using their cultural capital to develop other kinds of community capitals, such as *financial capital* and *built capital*.

An example of using cultural capital for economic gain through tourism is the community of Deadwood, S.D. Deadwood’s rich history as a gold rush town of the 1870s has led to the preservation and restoration of the community. Along with the addition of gaming activities, Deadwood has established itself as a National Historic Landmark, thus using its cultural capital to its advantage.

But for every positive change in enhancing their financial capital through economic development, Deadwood residents may also say that there have been negative impacts as well. This demonstrates that the seven community capitals are interrelated and that communities who make plans for the future need to consider how decisions will affect the community as a whole.

UNIQUE CITIES AND TOWNS

Another example of using the cultural capital in a community is advertising and hosting events that highlight the community’s claim to fame. Here in South Dakota we have many examples, including the “Rhubarb Capital of the World” (Leola), the “Pheasant Capital of the World” (several communities), the

The Fort Sisseton Historical Festival is held every June at a former Army outpost built in 1864. It features reenactments of frontier life at the fort, military demonstrations, music and dancing, storytelling, exploration of the fort grounds and buildings such as officers' quarters and Army barracks, blacksmith shops, and dozens of historical exhibits. This cultural capital can be used to enhance the six other community capitals as follows:

Natural Capital

The State Park offers fishing, canoeing, and camping areas. The Fort is located at the top of the Coteau des Prairies, in the heart of the glacial lakes region of northeast South Dakota.

Human Capital

The festival benefits from the planners, presenters, and historical reenactors who share their knowledge and expertise of frontier life. Volunteers provide time and labor.

Social Capital

Groups work together each year to plan the festival, partnering with state agencies, committees, vendors, and entertainers. Networks are established to make the event a reality each year.

Political Capital

Fort Sisseton is a State Historical Park and is managed by the South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks Department. State funding is used for preservation and upkeep of the State Park area.

Financial Capital

The annual festival brings nearly 30,000 visitors to the area, providing increased revenues to local businesses through tourism dollars. Onsite vendors of food and craft items pay fees and state sales tax.

Built Capital

Fort Sisseton is a National Historic Landmark. It is accessed by both state and county roads which are maintained by both state and county funds.

Figure 1. Example of cultural capital as an asset

“Home of the World’s Only Corn Palace” (Mitchell), the “Potato Capital of the World” (Clark), the “Hay Capital of the World” (Gayville), and many more. Communities use these common themes to create festivals and events while promoting tourism and economic growth; all of which enhance other community capitals.

Cultural events such as that held at Fort Sisseton (see fig. 1) show how communities can work together to enhance the resources and assets available to them. If people can find success in putting together a cultural event, then they are also capable of working together to tackle other community issues. In this example, state, regional, county, and local resources were necessary to the success of the event, and everyone benefits from being involved.

CONFLICTING CULTURAL CAPITAL

Events and celebrations are just one element of cultural capital in a community. Getting work done depends on groups being able to work together for common goals. Cultural differences may sometimes get in the way. Conflicting cultural capitals may ex-

ist when there are two different populations living together, with different traditions, history, and values. Minority populations and new immigrant populations can add a richness to a community’s cultural capital when the differences are embraced and celebrated. But those differences can also complicate decision-making in a community when a dominant group tries to force its values on another.

Our South Dakota communities are constantly changing and becoming more diverse. These changes can be perceived as a threat to “what was,” or they can be an opportunity of “what could be.”

Investing in cultural capital can enhance tourism, build social networks, build unity among diverse populations, and define a community’s identity. As your community designs the future, determine what cultural capital exists in your community, how it is currently used, and how it can be built upon in the future.

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