

The

RURAL

ACTION

PROJECT

**Moving from Talk to Action
to Address Rural Colorado's
Needs and Goals**



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The Rural Action Project:

Moving from Talk to Action to Address Rural Colorado's Needs and Goals

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Executive Summary

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Over three years, CSU faculty, staff, and students worked together with rural communities across the state of Colorado on the Rural Action Project (RAP), a program designed to foster belonging and increase communities' capacity to work together. The program asked residents to sit down and talk with each other, identify their shared needs and goals, and work together to implement a local public project. With funding from CSU's Rural Initiative, partners from the CSU Office of Engagement and Extension and the Center for Public Deliberation worked with fifteen rural communities to design the program and offered workshops for local leaders focused on boosting their engagement skills. After their training, community organizations—including non-profit organizations, government entities, Family Leadership Training Institute (FLTI) programs, and local youth groups—implemented a series of Community Conversations for over 300 residents across the state. Conversations asked participants to identify their community assets, values, needs, and goals. By the end of the meetings, residents proposed a Community Project and applied for \$5,000 mini-grants to assist with implementation. Community members then worked together to put their plans into action, culminating in a wide range of community projects from cultural celebrations to direct assistance programs.

RURAL NEEDS AND GOALS

During their conversations, residents completed worksheets that collected data about their needs and goals, both to assist in the development of their Community Project and to provide insight for local and statewide leaders. Residents identified several assets common to rural Colorado communities, including access to parks, outdoor spaces, and community celebrations. They identified their local community resource centers and places of worship as sites of belonging and named numerous clubs, local organizations, and places of employment that foster thriving communities. They saw rural communities as places that center care and offer quiet living and a sense of connection.



MOST-MENTIONED RURAL RESIDENT VALUES

Belonging & Inclusion

Safety & Security

Personal Responsibility

Diversity

Freedom

Sustainability

Across the data, residents expressed a desire for community inclusion and engagement, particularly for those who have been historically excluded from such opportunities. They requested more education about and access to community resources. In many communities, language access emerged as a key need, and some residents called for more responsive and representative community leadership. Residents also offered insight into their material needs, including affordable and reliable housing and healthcare. They also requested more access to recreation, health education, and affordable and healthy food, and hoped communities would create more career pathways for rural residents.



**Inclusion &
Engagement**



**Community
Resources**



**Housing &
Healthcare**



**Language
Access**



Leadership



Recreation



**Health
Education**



**Healthy
Food**



**Career
Pathways**

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

At the end of the program, our partner organizations implemented projects that brought community members together and directly addressed community needs, including:

CULTURAL

festivals

LIFE SKILLS

classes

RESOURCE

fairs

COMMUNITY

storytelling

WAYFINDING

programs

INFRASTRUCTURE

improvements

Communities hosted and developed local resources including:

- hosting a Cinco de Mayo festival
- building a traditional Adobe oven
- installing a historic interpretive trail
- creating opportunities for community learning and connection
- engaging in community storytelling and art projects
- offering textile skills and English as a second language classes
- expanding health resource fairs for Spanish-speaking residents
- promoting kindness in their communities

IMPACTS, EVALUATION + NEXT STEPS

Throughout the program, CSU researchers worked with communities to evaluate its quality and impact. Participant surveys were overwhelmingly positive. After their conversations, residents felt more connected to one another, more informed about their local community, and more motivated to take action. Interviews with organizers and participants provided further insight. Organizers generally appreciated the training and the help bringing their communities together but hoped for extended civic training opportunities and highlighted the need for flexibility and increased community resources. Those communities that already had high levels of community training and experience engaging diverse community members across difference, such as those affiliated with FLTI programs, often resulted in higher and more diverse turnout for Community Conversations and an increased ability to leverage additional resources that expanded the reach and impact of their Community Projects.

Throughout, interviewees often echoed the hopeful tone found in the worksheets and surveys and routinely expressed a desire for greater community belonging and inclusion for diverse residents. They generally saw the program as a positive experience and expressed a desire for similar opportunities, particularly those that might offer more community resources and project funding. In the future, the CSU team hopes to expand the reach and impact of the program by opening the opportunity to urban and Front Range communities, as well as other locations, and extending and specializing the training opportunities for community leaders.

KEY OUTCOMES



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Introduction

Between 2022 and 2024, the Rural Action Project (RAP) worked to support rural communities across Colorado by bringing residents together to shape their shared future. Established with funding from the CSU System Board of Governors' Rural Initiative through the Vibrant Communities focus area, RAP began with the recognition that building vibrant communities in rural areas requires resources for belonging, civic dialogue, and community-driven problem solving. Connecting talk to action, RAP was designed to build long-term civic capacity for local communities by deepening their network connections, boosting and expanding local leadership, and fostering diverse and inclusive engagement opportunities that increase rural areas' social capital and community resilience.

RURAL OPPORTUNITIES

The Rural Initiative was designed to promote sustainable rural living by harnessing the resources of local communities and the research, teaching, and engagement conducted on CSU campuses.¹ Rural communities often face substantial inequities, but they also offer a unique site for deep local governance and economic growth and innovation. For example, children in rural Colorado are more likely to live in poverty than their urban counterparts, and rural Colorado residents often face health disparities exacerbated by the rapid loss of health resources in rural communities.²

Rural communities, however, offer unique opportunities for local innovation and economic prosperity. Despite narratives about rural decline, rural Colorado communities have seen an increase in population growth in recent years due, in part, to immigration and an influx in residents aged 25-44.³ The economic sector faces similar opportunities, such as the expansion of the outdoor recreation tourism industry and regenerative agriculture practices that have helped farmers adapt to changing climate and increase profits.⁴

With these changes, however, comes a pressing need to develop local leadership and civic capacity. Compared to urban communities, which require 1 in 33 people to serve in leadership positions, rural areas require 1 in 8 local residents step into leadership roles.⁵ Though community members from diverse backgrounds hold leadership roles in rural spaces,⁶ some rural areas are faced with the potential need to cancel local elections because civic engagement is so low.⁷ The Rural Action Project was designed to help rural Colorado fill that gap, by harnessing the resources already available to rural communities, including their people, and encouraging community members to work collectively to understand and address their shared needs and goals.

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION

Finding sustainable solutions to the types of issues faced by rural communities will require meaningful engagement that brings communities together across difference,⁸ but local governments often struggle to meet the rising demands for their services and need to make tough choices about how to leverage limited resources.⁹ If local communities hope to address these concerns despite scarcity, they must be intentional in their engagement efforts and must include not only conversations, but also community-driven action.¹⁰ Such efforts should be designed to both ensure that local decisions are responsive to changing public needs and develop the long-term capacity for local leadership and agency.

This type of collaborative governance relies on social capital, or the ties that bind communities together, such as network connections, feelings of belonging, agency, and community trust.¹¹ Social capital can increase community members' willingness to collaborate and has been linked to positive community outcomes, including educational attainment, improved health, and greater community resilience in response to disasters.¹² Beyond connections, however, collaborative governance also requires leadership skills that span a wide range of engagement methods, such as deliberative discussion, public work, and community advocacy, and engagement opportunities that create inclusive opportunities for members of the public to influence outcomes.¹³

Unfortunately, communities in the United States are facing substantial barriers to this type of engagement as residents become more socially isolated, politically polarized, and disconnected from the sites of public power.¹⁴ Without either the community networks that bind residents together or the resources and skills to foster engagement, local communities face significant challenges to tackling their toughest problems. The RAP team attempted to address those concerns, designing a locally-implemented engagement program that moves from belonging to action.

To do this, the CSU team relied on best practices established by civic practitioners and academic researchers. Across the globe, communities interested in improving local governance have begun to adopt democratic innovations that center community voices and allow local residents to weigh in on public decisions.¹⁵ These programs take a variety of approaches to engagement, but generally they encourage community members to come together across difference, engage in collective learning, and reach informed and considered decisions about shared problems. Research demonstrates that such programs can work, both by increasing the quality and sustainability of local decisions and by encouraging future engagement among members of the public. Participation in informed and respectful conversations can increase residents' sense of agency, their feelings of trust and connection to one another, and their engagement within their local communities.¹⁶ Similarly, training programs and collective action efforts focused on public work and community advocacy can boost residents' sense of efficacy

and their sense of trust in one another and help them enact meaningful change in local communities.¹⁷ RAP was designed to build on these efforts, moving from talk to action in the hopes of helping communities develop their civic capacity and work together to build thriving communities.



Conversations and Projects:

Top Left: Community Horno in San Luis Valley

Top Right: Phillips County Mural Contest

Middle Left: Logan County Conversation

Middle Right: Roaring Fork Valley

Bottom: Hometown Heroes BBQ in Logan County

Program Overview

Between 2022 and 2024, RAP engaged 15 rural communities in a series of community trainings, conversations, and projects designed to address current needs and goals and build their long-term capacity for civic work. The following sections describe how the program was collaboratively designed and provide details about the structure of the conversation series and the outcomes of the community projects.

WORKING WITH COLORADO COMMUNITIES

CSU sought to partner with a range of communities, both in geographic location and type of organization. To participate, interested organizations were asked to fill out a brief application detailing their interest in the program, how they hoped to bring their communities together, and their experience engaging their community. In the first year, ten host sites were selected, and in the second year eight host sites were chosen, including two communities who participated both years. Partners included local government entities, non-profit and advocacy organizations, youth groups, and FLTI affiliates. From resort-adjacent villages in the foothills and mountains to farming and industrial communities on the Eastern Plains, RAP served a cross section of Colorado.



LOCAL PARTNERS

2023

- San Luis:** San Luis Valley Area Extension, Soul Players of the San Luis Valley
- Huerfano County:** Emerald Dragon Food Forests
- Prowers County:** Prowers County CSU Extension
- Cheyenne County:** Communities that Care, Cheyenne County CSU Extension
- Sedgwick County:** Community Economic Development of Sedgwick County, Sedgwick County Health Center
- Morgan County:** Morgan County Family Center, Morgan County FLTI
- Logan County:** Family Resource Center, CSU Northeast Regional Engagement Center
- Kit Carson County:** East Central Council of Governments, City of Burlington, Burlington Public Library
- Roaring Fork Valley:** La Clinica del Pueblo, Safe and Abundant Nutrition Alliance (SANA), Roaring Fork Leadership

LOCAL PARTNERS

2024

- Logan County:** CSU NE Regional Engagement Center
- Wray:** City of Wray, Northeast Colorado Health Department
- Montrose County:** Mexican American Development Association
- Phillips County:** Phillips County Economic Development Corporation
- Morgan County:** Morgan County Family Center
- Teller County:** Teller County Public Health & Environment, Teller County 4-H
- Cripple Creek:** Cripple Creek Parks and Recreation
- Teller, Fremont, and El Paso Counties:** Living History Association of Rock Ledge Ranch, CSU Extension

CSU PARTNERS

In addition to these local partnerships, CSU built a collaborative team across units, working to bridge local extension partners with Fort Collins Campus faculty and staff. For a full list of Rural Action Project Team Members, see Appendix A. Partners included:

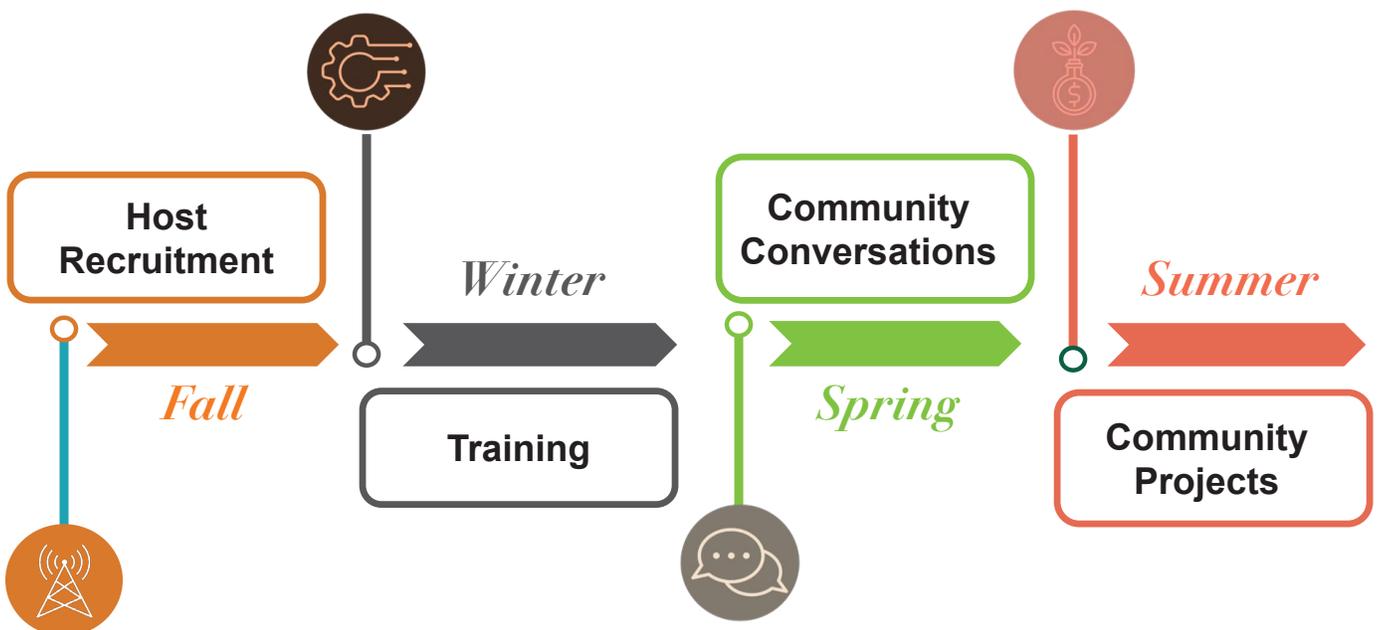
- **CSU Office of Engagement and Extension (OEE)**
- **Family Leadership Training Institute (FLTI) of Colorado at CSU Extension**
- **Center for Public Deliberation (CPD)**
- **Department of Communication Studies**
- **CSU Prevention Research Center- Department of Human Development and Family Studies**
- **4-H**
- **Public Lands History Center**

NATIONAL PARTNERS

Finally, the CSU design team drew on the expertise of Extension faculty and university staff across the country. The program was modeled in part after programs at other universities, including Reimagine Rural developed by University of Montana Extension, the Community Boot Camp from the University of Idaho Extension, and the Community Collaborative implemented by the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at Louisiana State University. It also leveraged the expertise of Extension faculty at Minnesota State University Extension and the University of Kentucky, who acted as design consultants and keynote speakers during year one.

COLLABORATIVE DESIGN

The first year was spent in conversation with local leaders. OEE leadership convened a state-wide design team that worked together to identify goals for the program and provide an outline for the project. The design team expressed a commitment to building local belonging—particularly for historically excluded communities—and a desire to help communities celebrate rural places and histories and construct local narratives reflective of their changing populations and needs. Members of that team suggested incorporating community training and ensuring opportunities for shared work and public action.



RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

In the Fall and Winter of 2023, the team began to put the plan into action in local communities. CSU leaders from statewide OEE and FLTI teams recruited local organizations to participate, and a Central Project Team began to design the agendas for the conversations and the materials for the grant application. Next, leaders from selected host sites took part in training activities. Trainings were redesigned across years to respond to changes to the Community Conversations agendas (described below) and based on feedback from local partners. Year 1 trainings were entirely virtual. Leaders from each host site were asked to attend two required online trainings. The first provided an overview of the program and reviewed best practices for community engagement and the second focused on the hybrid model of implementation. In response to feedback that indicated a need for increased training along with a greater desire for connection across sites, Year 2 began with a full day training that brought local leaders from across the state together at the CSU Spur campus in Denver. That workshop similarly featured an introduction to the program and best practices for engagement but offered extended introductions to key skills—such as facilitation, stakeholder analysis, and data collection—and a chance to practice components of the Community Conversation agendas. The second year provided much more time for communities to connect and learn from each other resulting in increased engagement, enthusiasm, and connection between communities. The agenda for Year 2 training is available in Appendix B.

After the trainings, leaders from partner organizations began to work with their local communities to plan their Community Conversations. Each host site was paired with a CSU mentor who acted as a point person for any questions and assisted in program design and implementation where needed. Host site leaders had the additional option of attending regular office hours with mentors and members of the CSU Central Project Team, which offered an opportunity for leaders from sites across the state to connect with one another and share advice as they worked with their home communities.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

In the spring, local host sites held a series of three to four Community Conversations using agendas and materials provided by CSU and often offering interpretation and translation using a language access model. In both years, all meeting materials were available in both English and Spanish. CSU also provided local organizations with hospitality funds to support meeting logistics, such as renting event space, providing food, or offering accommodations including interpretation and childcare.

The first meetings were designed to increase community belonging and understanding and identify shared community assets, values, needs, and goals. Later meetings allowed community members to brainstorm, select, and begin to develop community projects. The first year of the program relied on a three-part hybrid conversation series that connected local communities across the state. The first half of the local meetings were led virtually by the CSU leadership team and featured a keynote speaker who addressed the unique needs and opportunities in rural communities. Speakers included an expert on rural asset identification, a CSU historian who discussed the power of local storytelling, and an expert who discussed strategies for implementing realistic and meaningful community action projects. The second half of the meetings engaged community members in local conversations, encouraging them to respond to what they heard from the keynote speaker and discussing local assets, needs, and goals.

Feedback from communities highlighted some difficulties with this model. Although the hybrid nature had the benefit of connecting communities across the state, local leaders often faced recruitment challenges due to the pre-scheduled nature of the meetings, and the focus on the virtual keynote reduced the time available for local community connections and conversations. Additionally, some local participants did not connect with speakers and felt that, while interesting, the inclusion of outside speakers wasn't necessary. Overwhelmingly, feedback suggested that local conversations be given more time to focus on local connections and needs.

In Year 2, the CSU design team made substantial revisions to the Community Conversations based on this feedback. That year, all conversations were conducted at the local level and the agenda did not include keynote speakers. This gave participants substantially more time to engage in local conversations, connections, and shared storytelling. This also allowed local sites to host meetings at times that were more amenable to the community and gave them greater flexibility over the agendas. The format was also expanded to include an optional fourth meeting that gave participants greater input and control over the direction and design of their Community Project. See Appendix C for the Year 2 Long-Form Agenda.

Communities reported 145 Community Conversation participants in Year 1 and 163 participants in Year 2. Demographic information provided by participants indicates that many communities succeeded in inclusive recruitment practices, particularly regarding race, age, and education (see the Evaluation section for complete demographic information). After the community meetings, host sites applied for and received a mini-grant up to \$5,000 to implement their community project. Though some local organizations had a project in mind at the beginning of the program, others gave participants at the Community Conversations wide latitude in directing the project.

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

The goal of the community projects was to have communities develop projects over a 2-to-3-month time frame (knowing that some would take longer to complete fully.) Communities were asked to identify a project selected by the community that could be substantially completed over the summer. Over the summer and through the following year, communities used their mini-grants to implement deeply engaged public projects that connected local communities and directly addressed their shared needs and goals. From cultural celebrations to direct service provision, rural communities demonstrated their capacity to implement meaningful work and to bring their communities together. Host organizations worked with their local networks to bring additional resources to the table and implement projects. Communities partnered with a variety of local businesses, non-profit organizations, health care providers, local governments, schools, foundations, and community groups. This leveraged resources, expanded reach and impact, and strengthened local ties. Many communities expressed a desire to continue the work beyond the scope of the program and developed plans for implementation in future years without the assistance and financial support of CSU partners.

YEAR 1 *Projects*

CHEYENNE COUNTY *Heritage Trail & Celebration*

Communities that Care and Cheyenne County Extension worked with the Cheyenne County Historical Society and the Kit Carson FFA to install ten historical site posts throughout the county and hosted a street fair to celebrate the first round of installation and the significance and history of the landmarks for the area. The project created a sense of community, highlighted local history, and aimed to increase tourism.

YEAR 1*Projects***CITY OF BURLINGTON***Digital Information Display*

The Burlington Public Library worked with the City of Burlington and the Old Town Museum to purchase and install two digital display boards, a bench, and a bike rack designed to increase access to information about community resources and events and improve community livability.

GARFIELD COUNTY*Community Conversations & Health Fairs*

La Clínica del Pueblo and the Safe and Abundant Nutrition Alliances hosted a series of local conversations about equity, diversity, and inclusion and barriers to equality in the Roaring Fork Valley. After the conversations, access to health was identified as a major barrier to equity, so the organizations worked with 18 local health and community organizations to host mini-health fairs focused on providing resources and health testing to Spanish-speaking community members.

HUERFANO COUNTY*Emerald Dragon Food Forest*

Emerald Dragon Organic Food Cooperative worked with a coalition of local organizations to develop community gardens and food forest in partnership with Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger; the efforts were designed to address local food security and accessibility.

LAMAR*Stories of Our People*

The Prowers County Extension Office purchased recording equipment and supplies and then worked with residents and Lamar Community College to record local stories that provide a snapshot of the county in 2023 and highlight the community's history.

The project captured local stories at large community events and also hosted three storytelling events focused on topics like civic engagement, youth, and economic history.

LOGAN COUNTY*Cinco de Mayo Kermes Festival*

The CSU Northeast Regional Engagement Center worked with a wide range of local organizations and businesses to host a Cinco de Mayo Kermes event designed to provide education about Mexican history and celebrate Latino culture and heritage. Community partners estimated that over 600 community members attended the Kermes, and that over 100 volunteers, vendors, and performers participated. For many English as a second language business owners this was the first time they had a booth at a community event. From this experience, many Spanish speakers continue to explore educational opportunities for entrepreneurs, and this led to a partnership between CSU and the local community college to respond to this need.

MORGAN COUNTY*English Language & Life Skills for Community Connections*

The Morgan County Family Center, in partnership with its FLTI program created two classes for community members. An English as Second Language class offered English-language learning for adults. A sewing and tailoring class provided a space to develop life skills and authentic sharing across cultures and languages and support growing a sense of community, especially with many immigrant newcomers to the area.

SAN LUIS*Community Roots: Horno & Founders Day*

The San Luis Valley Area Extension Office worked with Soul Players of the San Luis Valley to purchase materials for the Founders Day Celebration that honored their local heritage and tradition. They also worked with the San Luis Cultural Heritage Center to build a community horno, an outdoor adobe oven used for traditional baking. The adobe oven was located at the local community center as a way to educate about traditional healthy baking and acts as a centerpiece to bring the community together and celebrate their heritage.

SEDGWICK COUNTY*55+ Forever Young*

The Community Economic Development of Sedgwick County and the Sedgwick County Health Center held a community event and movie night at the Assisted Living Center that offered health resources and support to fifty senior residents.

YEAR 2*Projects***CRIPPLE CREEK***Highway 67 Pedestrian Crossing*

Cripple Creek Parks and Recreation conducted a feasibility study for a safe pedestrian crossing at one of their highest areas of congestion. The project was designed to increase connectivity for residents and visitors to access local events, businesses, and attractions.

EL PASO AND TELLER COUNTIES*Educational Signage at Rock Ledge Ranch*

The Living History Association of Rock Ledge Ranch installed interpretive signs to better educate and direct visitors to natural and cultural resources at the historic site. The focus was increasing education, tourism, and celebrating local heritage.

MONTROSE*Community Latinx Heritage Festival*

The Mexican American Development Association hosted an outdoor event showcasing Latinx owned and operated businesses. The event featured non-profit partners, local food vendors, and community activities designed to highlight the community's cultural history. For many Spanish speaking owned businesses it was one of their first times participating as a community vendor.

MORGAN COUNTY*Health & Wellness Class Series*

The Morgan County Family Center worked to create a series of classes designed to increase access to health information and provide opportunities for group exercise, particularly across language barriers. Classes introduced community members to multiple topics, including healthy eating and mental health, and to diverse exercise options, including weight training and yoga. Classes were also designed to increase community connection and build social capital with local immigrants.

PHILLIPS COUNTY*Community Mural Project*

Phillips County Economic Development worked with the Haxtun Town Council to host a mural competition for local students. One winner was given a stipend and supplies to paint their mural, "One Heart, One Family, One Community" in Haxtun.

STERLING*Hometown Heroes BBQ*

The CSU Northeast Regional Engagement Center worked with the City of Sterling, Sterling Fire and Police Departments, Banner Health Sterling Regional MedCenter, the Family Resource Center, and the Logan County Chamber of Commerce to host a community barbeque attended by approximately 500 community members. Interpretation was provided at the event, and it built connections between community members and community leaders and among collaborating partners.

TELLER COUNTY*Teller, Stronger Together!*

Young people involved in Teller County 4-H worked together to develop a campaign designed to spread kindness, good deeds, and community connections and to promote the positive work of 4-H in the community. They produced t-shirts, water bottles, stickers, and pins with positive messages that they sold at community events to raise funds for their program and other local non-profit organizations.

WRAY*Pathway to Diversity Chalking Event & Inclusive Meeting Space*

The City of Wray worked with Communities that Care to host a Pathway to Diversity Chalk Event attended by over 150 community members with food vendors and entertainment. In addition, the City purchased meeting space technology to increase participation and accessibility at community meetings. It was meant to create a sense of connection and inclusion and celebrate the diversity of local community members as one thing that makes their community strong.



Rural Colorado Needs & Goals

During community meetings, residents completed worksheets designed to keep track of the conversation and collect data on community assets, values, needs, and goals. In Year 1, worksheets were completed individually, and in Year 2 worksheets were completed by small groups. Below, we look at trends across the state with a particular focus on wide-spread community needs and goals. Worksheet responses highlighted the ways that communities are both struggling and thriving and point towards their hopes for their communities. The data indicates that residents aim to build inclusive communities of belonging that provide access to public resources and knowledge and offer opportunities for robust community engagement.

COMMUNITY ASSETS AND PLACES FOR CONNECTION

In both years, the first meeting asked residents to identify their community assets and the places in the community that helped them develop a sense of connection and belonging. Communities recognized a wide range of local assets, including outdoor spaces, local organizations, educational institutions, youth groups, and community and cultural celebrations. Rural residents frequently saw outdoor spaces, recreational areas, and public parks as local assets. Participants appreciated that these public spaces are open to everyone and showcase the natural resources available in rural Colorado. These spaces offer connection for families and youth, and residents report their value in maintaining their mental health and wellbeing.

Rural residents also frequently identified individual organizations that they saw as vital for community belonging, such as local resource centers, places of worship, local employers, small businesses, and other community clubs and organizations. Similarly, local colleges and universities along with K-12 education institutions were seen as community assets, offering both educational resources and opportunities for community connection. Finally, community members often highlighted community celebrations, events, and festivals as anchors for community culture and belonging that allowed community members to come together across

Community Celebrations

*Community Clubs &
Organizations*

Educational Institutions

Local Events & Festivals

Local Employers

People Who Care

Places of Worship

Public Parks

Quiet Living

Recreational Areas

Resource Centers

Small Businesses

Slower Pace

difference and celebrate what is special about their home communities. In addition to places for connection, residents also identified quality of life as a community asset. Residents valued living in a smaller, slower-paced area and communicated pride in cultures that value quiet living and people who care about one another. Across communities, participants identified a need for public spaces that foster healthy living practices, celebration, and safe and inclusive personal interactions, and their Community Projects often reflected the value residents placed on these types of assets. Community Projects often drew on these assets, utilizing local networks to leverage resources, recruit widespread participation, and expand the impact of local projects. Moreover, they sought to create additional spaces for belonging, such as cultural celebrations, community classes and conversations, and improve access to outdoor spaces and recreational opportunities.

COMMON VALUES

Initial conversations also asked residents to identify the values they thought should be central to their communities. Belonging and inclusion were the most frequently mentioned values across communities, with almost all communities highlighting belonging as a central goal for their community and their work together. Safety and security and personal responsibility were also identified by several communities as key values. Residents wanted communities that felt safe for all residents and articulated an appreciation for hard work and personal accountability. Some communities saw freedom and liberty as key community values while others listed sustainability and diversity as important community goals. A few communities identified the values of accessibility and education, indicating a need for widespread access to public resources and knowledge. Finally, collaboration and teamwork were identified by some communities as vital community goals.

Many of the community projects again reflected the values that community members highlighted as important. Values such as belonging and diversity shaped events such as cultural festivals, intergenerational storytelling, kindness campaigns, and diversity chalking celebrations. Additionally, values such as security, accessibility, equity, and education framed projects like health fairs, healthy living seminars, online safety seminars, and meetings with first responders and community decision makers.

Belonging & Inclusion
Safety & Security
Personal Responsibility
Diversity
Freedom
Sustainability

COMMUNITY NEEDS

As they began to identify the work that they might do together in their communities, rural residents were asked to reflect on their community needs. Though each community faces unique needs based on their local context, some trends emerged across communities, including the need for more spaces for connection, increased access to resources like affordable housing, education, and health care, and more diverse and representative leadership in local institutions.

Residents frequently highlighted the value they place on belonging by noting an increased need for spaces for connection. Although participants routinely identified spaces for connection—such as public parks, resource centers, and cultural celebrations—as community assets, they also suggested the need to continue to build these types of opportunities for local residents. They at times worried about the lack of spaces for connection, and highlighted the need for more gathering spaces, such as coffee shops, local restaurants, or other types of outdoor or meeting spaces that could bring people together for conversation and public interactions. They also requested more of these types of spaces for young people, and suggested the need for more clubs, organizations, or activities that could bring young people together outside of school and sports. In line with this, they also desired more cultural celebrations that built community pride or created opportunities for understanding across difference, and some suggested the need for local news outlets that could keep community members up to date on local events and help them understand local issues.

In addition to greater connection, residents frequently expressed a need for key resources like housing, healthcare, childcare, and education. Across the state, rural residents are concerned about both costs and access. They frequently mentioned the high cost of housing and the lack of affordable housing in their community. In addition, they noted the high cost of health care and childcare, but frequently noted a number of

Activities for Young People
Affordable Housing
Access to Health Care
Access to Healthy Food
Child Care Services
Educational Opportunities
Expanded Career Opportunities
Increased Community Collaboration
Language Access
Local News
Mental Health Resources
Places for Connection
Representative Community Leadership
Youth Activities

underlying issues that caused these concerns, focusing on not only on cost but noting the distance to many health care providers and a need for more health and childcare professionals.

Residents were concerned that a lack of these resources made it difficult to attract new residents and to keep young people in their communities and expressed concern for older residents who may have difficulty accessing resources due to cost and social isolation. Residents frequently mentioned language access as a barrier to these resources and saw a distinct need for an increase in mental health services in rural communities. Residents also mentioned a need for increased opportunities for education and career pathways, again fearing local communities' ability to keep young residents and attract new residents when faced with diminished job prospects and access to local resources.

Communities also expressed a need for greater inclusion and diversity. Residents often discussed the difficulty of communicating across language barriers. They requested that local governments do more to ensure that resources were made accessible in additional languages and that public meetings and gatherings offered opportunities for connection across language barriers. Some residents highlighted a need for more diverse and inclusive leadership that better represented their community's shifting demographics or noted general concerns about prejudice, social isolation, and a lack of community trust.

.....

“Our community needs to see more people of color in positions of power, to have more equality, more representation, more resources for people without documents, to have more activities.”

~San Luis Valley Resident, Year 1

“[From these conversations] I learned that there are a lot more diverse individuals in our county that want to be as much a part of it but feel like they aren't allowed the opportunity due to their lack of representation.”

~Morgan County Resident, Year 2

.....

COMMUNITY GOALS AND BIG IDEAS

Finally, in preparation for their community projects, meeting participants were asked to work together to identify common goals and big ideas they hoped to implement in the future. Although some of these goals and ideas culminated in community projects, others offer suggestions for future directions for community action.

Community Connection & Belonging

Community members regularly requested more opportunities for connection. They suggested community welcoming groups and community gathering spaces for storytelling and sharing history. They suggested cultural festivals and recreation and arts centers and the opportunity for more community conversations, particularly across language barriers. Community members hoped to bridge generational and socio-economic gaps and emphasized the necessity of fostering genuine connections, reducing isolation, and promoting collaboration within their communities. Across the state, rural residents hoped to create community spaces where individuals feel comfortable, valued, and connected to one another.

Inclusion & Accessibility

Similarly, residents hope to create opportunities for diverse community members to be included, and they tied their goals of inclusion to the need for increased diversity and accessibility. Participants hoped for “inclusion, diversity for all, regardless of religion, customs, politics, or beliefs.” Participants in the conversations sought to bring people together and drew attention to the barriers that limited engagement across diversity. Residents often indicated a need to reach out to those who have historically been excluded from community decision making or engagement opportunities. Residents suggested that accessibility was key to achieving greater diversity and inclusion, and they paid particular attention to language equity and the need to make public resources more accessible to residents. They hoped that community groups could partner to expand access to community resources and to increase communication about their availability. The storytelling components of the curriculum were particularly effective in connecting community members across cultural and power differences. Communities reported multiple stories of residents being inspired after hearing stories of exclusion or targeting in community. Additionally, many were inspired to become engaged after seeing decision makers prioritize hearing peoples’ stories.

Expansion of Health Resources

Many communities identified the need for more health resources in their communities. Across both years, communities advocated for a variety of health resources. Residents hoped to provide access to healthy food and offer information and classes focused on nutrition. They advocated for more mental health resources and suggested that communities should help residents navigate complicated health systems and cultural barriers that prevented communities from utilizing health resources. They hoped for more opportunities for community exercise and recreation. Communities again pointed to the need to make existent resources more available to members of the public and requested resources be made available in multiple languages and that community organizations partner to offer those resources or communicate them to a wider swath of the public.

Educational Opportunities

Rural residents often expressed a desire for more educational programs and increased accessibility to existent opportunities. Community members hoped for more or improved education in a variety of areas including primary school, health information, resource availability, and information about local histories and cultural traditions. They suggested the need for workforce development programs and other training opportunities that would provide career pathways for rural residents. For example, Spanish speaking business owners asked for entrepreneur certification programs to be offered in Sterling, CO. Broadly, residents hoped that education could encourage young people to stay in their communities, that the public could learn about and feel a connection to their local heritage, and that the wider public could both have access to available resources and contribute to community well-being.

Project Evaluation

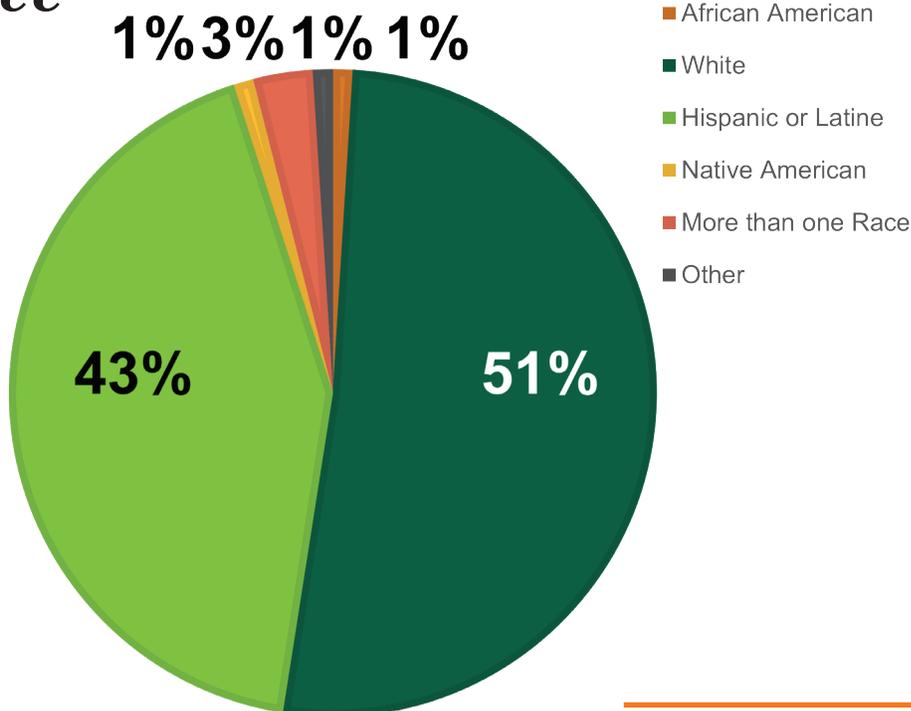
To assess the quality and impact of RAP, a team of CSU researchers conducted surveys of participants and interviews with participants and community leaders. Across the data, rural residents reported satisfaction with their experiences and an increased connection to their communities. They often reported that RAP had helped to generate hope and community motivation, though they frequently identified places for improvement and suggested opportunities for extending and strengthening local civic engagement.

SURVEY RESPONSES

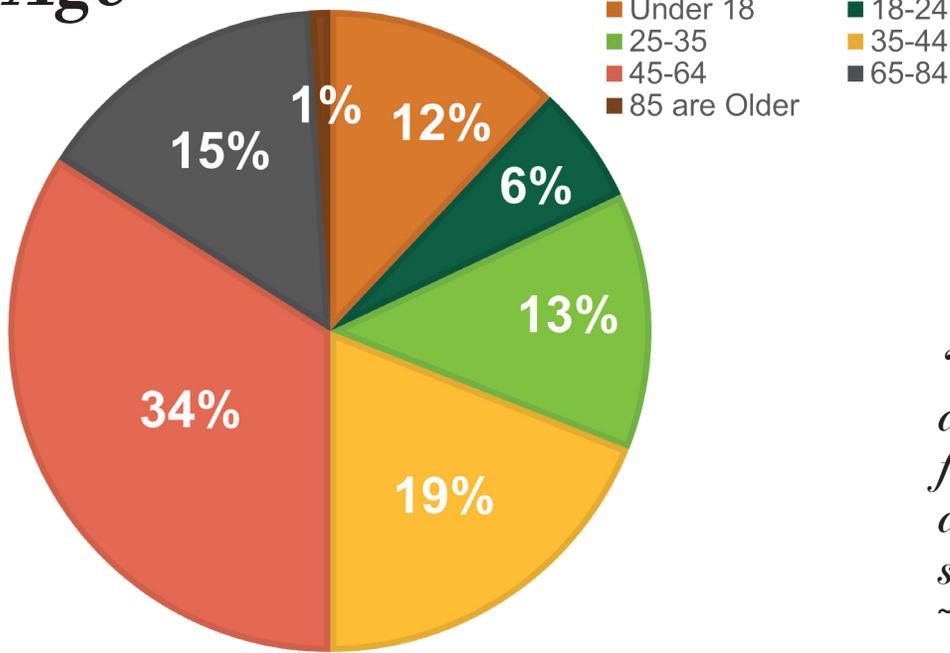
At the first community meeting in Year 1 and the last community meeting in Year 2, participants were asked to share their demographic data. The tables below provide an overview of the demographics of survey respondents, though many participants chose not to disclose their demographic information and some communities did not fully collect that data.

After RAP, 87% of participants were more motivated to work with others in their community to address community needs.

Participant Race



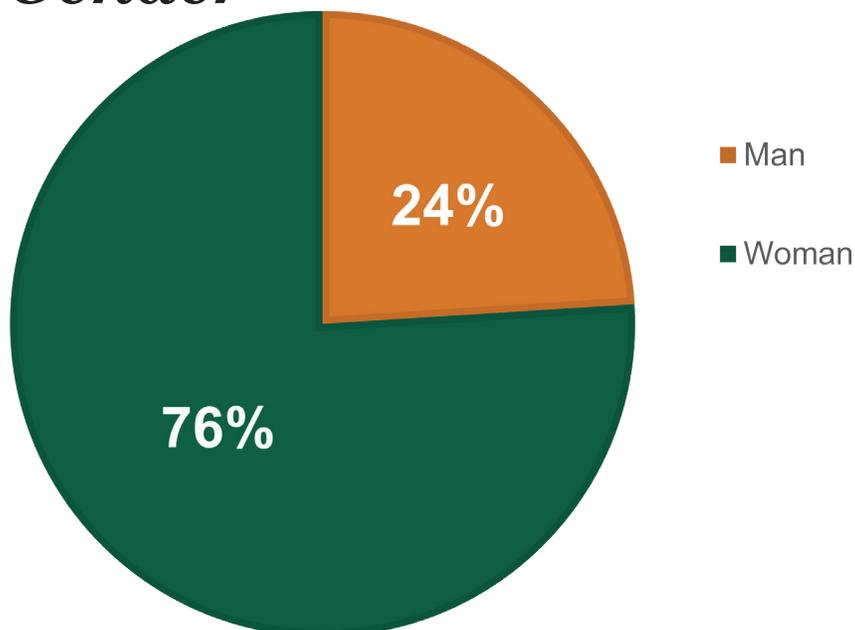
Participant Age



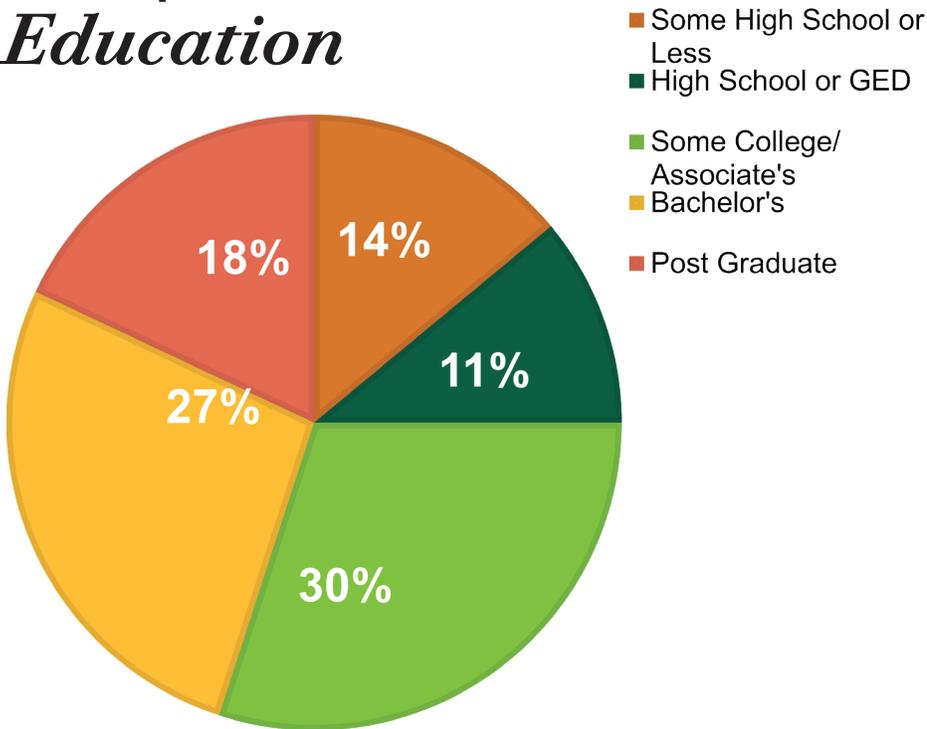
“My hope is that...belonging and connections will be felt by everyone of every age and economic status or social status.”

~ Logan County Resident, Year 1

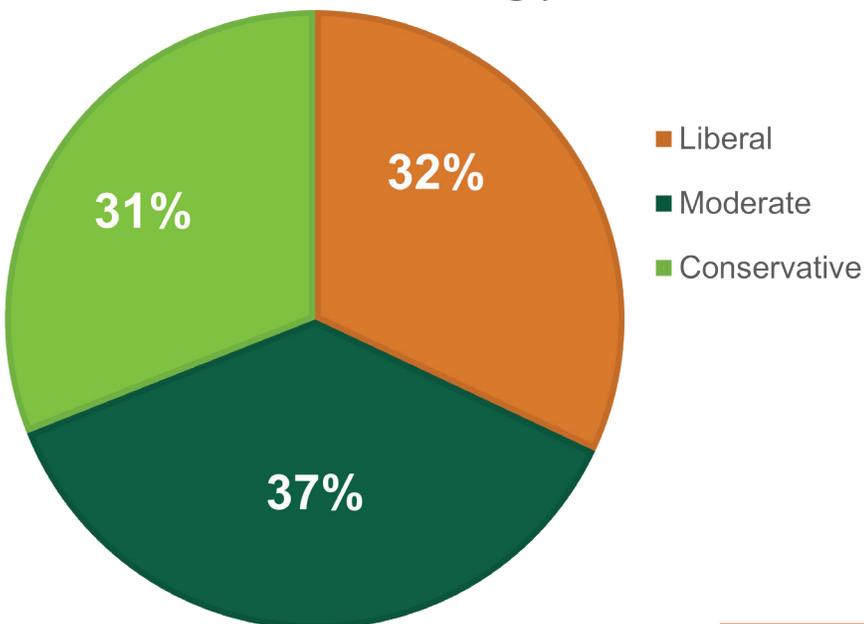
Participant Gender



Participant *Education*



Participant *Political Ideology*



In both years of the program, participants additionally took an evaluation survey at the end of their last meeting, providing their assessment of the quality of the meetings and offering feedback about their experience. In year one, we received completed evaluation surveys from 69 participants across six communities, and in year two we received 52 evaluation surveys across 5 communities. Respondents reported overwhelming satisfaction with the experience, indicating that they learned across difference about their community and felt more connected to their community and more motivated to take action after the conversations.



INTERVIEWS AND COMMUNITY REPORTS

In addition to taking part in surveys, local leaders and community participants were asked to participate in interviews about their experience and host sites were asked to submit a final report detailing their experience and community outcomes. Interviews were conducted in-person during RAP meetings and at project events— as well as via phone and virtual meeting software after meetings and projects had concluded. Below, we provide insight from their responses, first focusing on best practices that enabled communities to successfully implement the program before turning to barriers and areas for improvement.

Best Practices

In their responses, community members identified facets of the program that they believed contributed to its success. Some of their reflections seemed to reiterate the underlying structure of the program and highlighted how the focus on connections and collective action created positive outcomes for their communities. Others highlighted discrete design elements, such as language access and centralized support, that made the overarching project successful.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Across interviews and reports, community members identified RAP as an opportunity to bring community together and build connections that fostered feelings of belonging and the potential for future collaboration. Residents built opportunities for connection into both their conversations and their community projects, and community members appreciated the chance to connect across differences in age, socio-economic status, language, and length of residence. As one rural resident said, “Being newer in the community, this space has offered me a way to stay connected with others in the community for a sense of belonging and to share a culture I am familiar with.” Residents appreciated the opportunities to get to know other members of their communities, to learn about their experiences across difference, and to develop better understandings of one another and their collective community.

Some residents reported that they had been searching for opportunities to develop connections and give back to their communities, with some explaining that they felt unwelcome in other spaces. One host organization reported that one of their community member’s said, “It’s about time.” They continued, “People felt that this was way overdue. It’s about time that this community came together to meet us, get to know us, and celebrate us – all of us.” Aside from simply linking individuals, however, the process also created opportunities for linking individuals to organizations or linking organizations to

BUILDING CONNECTIONS (CONT.)

one another. Communities routinely built projects that connected communities to local organizations and public resources and often spoke of the way that the process built the collaborative potential of their communities.

Finally, some communities benefited from already having deep community connections or experience hosting similar conversations. Several sites worked as collaborative partnerships, with multiple community organizations working together to implement the conversation series and the community projects. These partnerships often made it easier for host sites to draw on existent resources, including community networks, local expertise, and financial assistance, to supplement the materials and resources provided by the central CSU team. Sites that coupled with already existent Family Leadership Training Institutes often saw particular success and could draw on their robust community networks and community members who had already received training in leadership, key civic tools, facilitation, and community organizing. Similarly, many sites worked closely with CSU Extension faculty, who could leverage CSU's resources and expertise. In short, the program appeared to be most successful when implemented by collaborative community groups who had already begun to build their community's civic capacity.

“This groundbreaking work in our community invited everyone to come together and collaborate on a project; specifically a project that was community identified and community led. The RAP project helped us identify and develop two amazing community leaders who stepped out of their comfort zones and did an amazing job at facilitating our bilingual conversation series.... By the end of the series, they had helped create such strong connections in the diverse audience that they guided the community into collaborating for not only a community celebration, but also for taking a collective stand against homelessness at a City Council meeting.”

~ Logan County Community Partner, Year 1

COMMUNITY-LED ACTION

Many communities joined RAP as an opportunity to increase community involvement and make progress on public projects. Some organizations saw the low threshold for involvement in the conversation series as an “easy win” for their rural areas. As one partner stated, “This didn’t require much experience but allowed for folks to get involved. Wasn’t intimidating for folks to just get started.” Others saw it as an opportunity to include the voices of folks who have been historically excluded. When asked if they feel like they have a voice in the community, a participant stated “No, I don’t feel like I have

a voice in the community, but here during these discussions, I do have a voice.” The conversations served as a starting point for listening to the public and gave community members an opportunity to influence decisions made in their community.

Through the implementation of public projects, communities put some of their ideas into action. All of the communities involved in the program ultimately completed a community project, often using the \$5,000 minigrant as a jumping-off point for generating more resources through donations, community volunteers, and subsequent grant applications and boosting the impact of their efforts beyond what could be expected with the initial pool of funds. Ultimately, communities used their projects to make meaningful and material changes for their communities. Among other outcomes, they increased access to health resources, fostered the celebration of local heritage, expanded economic opportunities, and shared their communities’ stories and histories.

“The Pathway to Diversity Event was exactly that: A community of all people enjoying a day of diverse food, entertainment, and art - TOGETHER.”

~Wray Resident, Year 2

DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIC CAPACITY

In addition to producing singular projects, however, RAP often gave communities the opportunity to develop their local civic capacity. Community leaders often highlighted the way the program had been used to develop local leadership, particularly among historically excluded communities. The inclusion of interpreters fostered interest in developing local interpretation businesses that could both improve community connections and engagement and provide career pathways for local residents. Others noted how community members became leaders through project implementation, acting as event organizers, fostering collaboration among community members, or developing their individual confidence to contribute to public efforts. Some noted the process helped increase collaboration among formal organizations, like city government, and community members. RAP offered an opportunity to build trust, learn from each other, and develop new ways to work effectively together. In some instances, local students were involved, and young people had the opportunity to develop their own civic skills as community leaders.

In some communities, the work continued beyond the scope of the project. Some reported that they continued to host cultural celebrations that had been initiated during the RAP program and hoped that they would become an annual tradition. Others used the work to apply for additional grants to continue their engagement efforts. One community, Montrose, noted that key leaders in the conversation decided to create an advocacy team to implement three additional projects identified through the process. Others reported seeing increased collaboration among residents or local organizations or an increase in trust among residents.

LANGUAGE ACCESS

Aside from the overarching structure of the project, participants also noted access to language justice as a primary driver of their successful ability to build connections and effective participation across language barriers. All host sites could request assistance with interpretation, and all materials were made available in Spanish. The CSU team also encouraged the use of a language access model of interpretation, which provides simultaneous translation in English and Spanish so that all participants can be an active participant in the conversation. As one host organization said, “By incorporating Language Access practices, communities saw connection between participants who don’t commonly interact due to different spoken languages.”

COLLABORATIVE SUPPORT

Finally, several community partners leveraged their existent community organizations and connections and appreciated the resources provided by the CSU design team and mentors, including meeting agendas and materials designed to bring their communities together. Similarly, statewide partnerships across counties provided guidance and support for project management, particularly in counties with only one or two Extension Faculty. One county Extension faculty expressed that “because staff size is limited, I was intrigued with trying to find something new that we could bring that looked like it was going to be manageable for the staff size we have.” Aside from offering meeting materials, the project also worked to provide each community with mentorship while still granting ownership to the communities to implement the conversations and projects in ways that made sense for their local community.

One of the host organizations relayed the following feedback from a local resident, *“Because these counties are so poor,” the host partner said, “a lot of projects go in, get grants, and then leave [these communities] high and dry.”*

For this local leader, RAP offered a different model, building collaboration within communities and ensuring local agency while offering central resources and support.

Barriers & Limitations

In addition to the best practices identified by organizations and participants, the interviews and final reports also revealed some barriers and limitations. In particular, they identified rigid design features, issues with community recruitment, and limited time and funds as potential barriers to success.

FORMAL OR RIGID DESIGN ELEMENTS

For some communities, the formal process design felt too rigid. In year one, all meetings were hosted at the same time so that communities could connect across the state. This limited the ability of host organizations to respond to scheduling conflicts (this will be discussed in more detail below). That year, the meetings additionally included a speaker at the beginning of the night that was broadcast to communities across the state. Though communities often valued the information provided by the speakers, some felt that the time spent on the presentations limited the time for conversations among participants. Others did not like the worksheets that individuals were asked to complete to collect data, saying that it felt like “homework.” The CSU team attempted to respond to these critiques in the redesign between years one and two—removing the requirement that all communities meet at the same time, eliminating formal presentations that were included in year one, and using table notetaking documents instead of individual worksheets.

In addition to overarching design features, the long-form agenda provided scripts that facilitators could use to explain the process to participants. Though the CSU team encouraged communities to adapt the program and language to meet their communities’ needs and norms, those scripts at times felt too formal, particularly for sites where young people led the conversations. However, some community facilitators appreciated having a full facilitator agenda. Even so, rigid adherence to the scripts or formal agenda segments at times meant that communities were rehashing decisions that had organically been made in previous sections or, conversely, moved forward even if the community had not been able to reach a decision in the previous segment. Communities that did take greater control over the agenda, however, were often able to adapt it to their community’s needs, spending more time on some segments, skipping others all together, and generally remaining flexible in response to community input.

COMMUNITY RECRUITMENT

For some host organizations, recruiting community members to participate in the conversation series proved the most challenging part of the program. In year one, this was particularly difficult, as communities could not adjust the meeting times, which ran up against important high school basketball games or city council meetings in some communities that likely lowered levels of attendance. Other host sites struggled to get the word out beyond community members who are routinely engaged in their communities. This led some to worry that conversations and final projects were not reflective of diverse community perspectives. As previously mentioned, this was more likely to occur when host organizations were working alone rather than in partnership with other community organizations. In future iterations, it may be helpful to spend more time working with communities to identify and connect with potential stakeholders and encourage local organizations to partner to implement both the conversation series and the final projects.

LIMITED FUNDS AND TIME

Some community members suggested that their efforts were hampered by the timeline for implementation and the limited amount of funds available through the hospitality stipend and the mini-grant. Because the CSU team only had a three-year window with which to spend their funding, host organizations were asked to implement the entire process between late fall and summer. For some communities, this timeline felt too tight. They hoped for more time to prepare for and recruit participants into their conversations, to prepare the mini-grant application, and to implement their final projects. Similarly, though host sites were provided with a hospitality stipend, for some these resources felt limited because they were asked to host multiple meetings. More funds would have made it easier for local sites to provide more accommodations for participants, such as food and childcare. Finally, some community members felt like the process required too much work for the level of resources offered through the grant. Most grants do not require multiple community meetings to receive funds, so some host sites worried that the amount of work required was not commensurate with the amount of funding offered through the mini-grant.

Next Steps

Over three years, the CSU team worked with 15 rural communities and local residents across the state to foster community conversations, learn about the needs and goals of rural residents, and empower communities to take action on their self-identified goals. The CSU team, and many of their statewide partners, hope to continue this work in the future, expanding its reach and impact and using it as a tool to understand best practices for community engagement.

EXPANDING TO ADDITIONAL COMMUNITIES

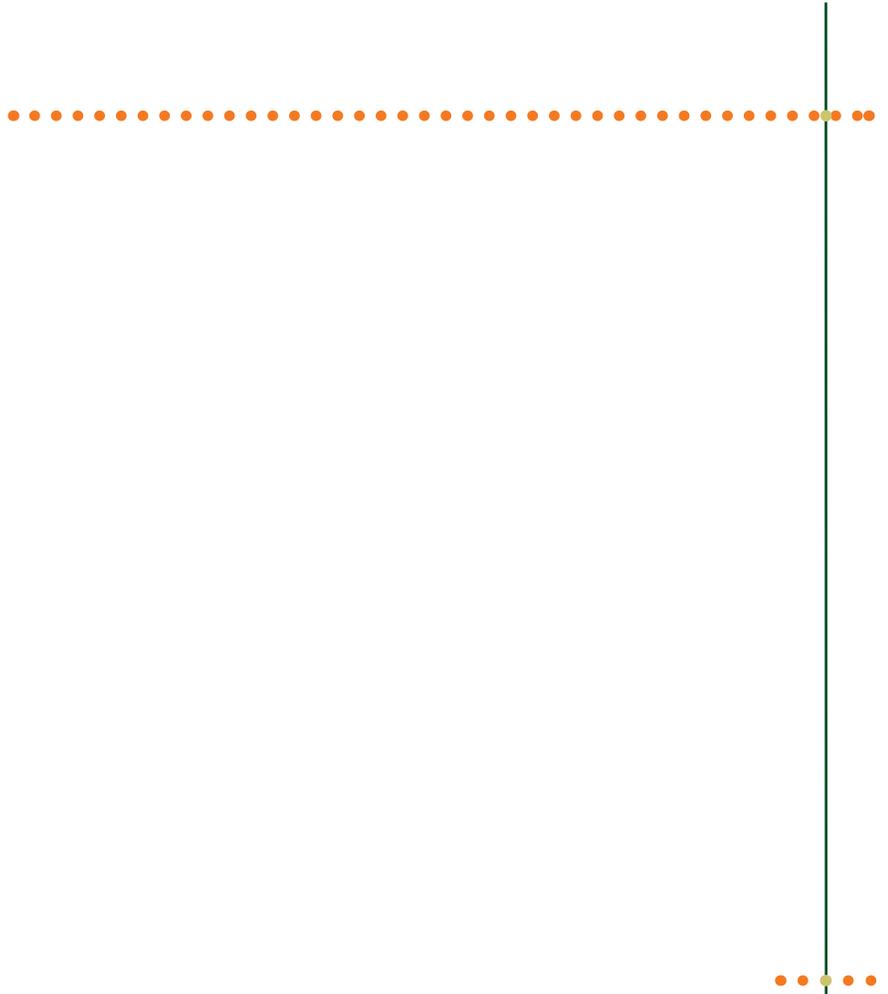
For this iteration, the team was required to focus on rural communities and could not include Front Range communities, even if those communities were rural. In the future, the program could be expanded to urban communities and to the Colorado Front Range. Such expansion may provide the opportunity for regional partnerships, linking nearby communities together and helping communities leverage regional resources or tackle regional problems. Similarly, the CSU team hopes to find opportunities to implement the program outside of Colorado. RAP was already modeled off programs in other states; it may similarly act as a model for practitioners elsewhere. The opportunity to implement RAP, or portions of it, in other locations would both expand its capacity to build community connections and foster collective action and offer insight into how local, community-centered engagement can be practiced across diverse contexts.

TRAINING FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS

One of the most promising outcomes of the program was the ability to enhance the civic engagement skills of community leaders across the state and their opportunities to build connections with one another. In year two, the CSU team attempted to directly harness this potential, when leaders from host organizations came together for an all-day in person training at CSU Spur in Denver. This offered extended time to help host sites learn about the program and gave them more opportunities to directly practice certain agenda items or make progress on planning their conversation series.

In the future, the CSU team plans to expand their training opportunities to better meet the needs of community leaders in Colorado and offer more specialized trainings that allow leaders to develop specific skills, such as grant writing or facilitation. The team has already made progress on these efforts. FLTI has begun to implement local Civic Learning Labs, short-term trainings that give community members the opportunity to learn skills related to advocating for change within local challenges ranging from attainable housing to K-12 education systems. Moreover, FLTI and CPD leadership

worked together to offer a full day workshop, the Art of Hosting, that brings leaders from community organizations together with CSU faculty and staff to develop their skills for designing and facilitating community conversations. The CSU team intends to expand these efforts and continue learning from community members about which civic skills and engagement programs would be most useful for local community leaders.



Endnotes

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: RURAL ACTION PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS

Maria Judith Alvarez, Statewide Design Team
 Natalie Bachmeier, Mentor, Research Team, Statewide Design Team
 Letitica Bancroft, Statewide Design Team
 Aliria Bello de Delgado, Central Project Team, Statewide Design Team, Mentor
 Beth Binder, Central Project Team
 Olivia Birg, Research Team
 Melissa Bond, Consultant, Keynote speaker
 Sue Boyett, Statewide Design Team
 Jonathan Cable, Central Project Team, Research Team, Mentor
 Tamanda Chabvuta, Mentor, Research Team
 Leisl Carr Childers, Consultant, Keynote Speaker
 Liam de Busca, Research Team
 Alice Dong, Mentor
 Ivan Estela, Statewide Design Team
 Gregory Felsen, Mentor and Statewide Design Team
 Lynn Hempel, Statewide Design Team
 Rebecca Hill, Statewide Design Team
 Elizabeth Kiehne, Statewide Design Team
 Katherine R. Knobloch, Project Co-Lead
 Stephen Lauer, CSU Site Mentor
 Derek Lowstuter, Site Sponsor
 Nadine Lund, Central Project Team, Statewide Design Team, Mentor
 Patrick McCabe, Research Team
 David MacPhee, Research Team and Statewide Design Team
 Michaela Mattes, Site Sponsor
 Heather Meyer, Central Project Team, Statewide Design Team, Mentor, Research Team
 Noah Niemeyer, Research Team
 Andrea Palm-Porter, Statewide Design Team
 Eric Pildner, Intern
 Karen Ramey-Torres, Statewide Design Team
 Ivon Estela Romo, Statewide Design Team
 Sarah Roth, Research Team
 Sue Schneider, Statewide Design Team
 Patti Schmitt, Project Co-Lead
 Sabrina Slagowski-Tipton, Mentor
 Lacey Taylor, Site Sponsor
 Glenda Wentworth, Statewide Design Team
 Willie Wilkins, Central Project Team, Statewide Design Team, Mentor, Research Team
 Ginger Williams, Statewide Design Team
 Ben Winchester, Consultant, Keynote speaker
 Paula Yuma, Statewide Design Team
 Kinsey Zeigner, Research Team

APPENDIX B: YEAR 2 TRAINING WORKSHOP AGENDA

Rural Action Project Community Host Training
November 2, 2023, 9:30am – 3:30pm
CSU Spur Campus, Denver CO

9:30-10:05: Welcome

- Interpretation Instructions
- RAP Team Introductions
- Small Group Introductions
- Group Norms and Dot Voting Practice

10:05-10:35 Introduction to the Rural Action Project

- Purpose
- Community Conversations
- Roles and Responsibilities
- Community Project Overview
- Q&A

10:35-10:50: Explanation of Mini-Grants

- Scope, Scale, and Feasibility
- Paperwork and requirements
- Q&A

10:50-11:00: Break

11:00-11:40: Storytelling

- Social Group Identities
- Storytelling Activity
- Debrief

11:40-12:30: Building Out a Community Project: Having the Conversation

- Deliberative Facilitation
- Community Scorecard Activity
- Gallery Walk
- Community Scorecard Activity Cont.
- Dot Voting

12:30-1:00: Lunch

1:00-1:30: Building Out a Community Project: Dealing with Difficult Situations

- Reframing
- Reframing Exercise
- Debrief

1:30-2:20: Stakeholders and Inclusive Spaces

- Introduction to Stakeholders
- Introduction to Social Capital
- Stakeholder Mapping Exercise
- Storytelling Exercise

2:20-2:50: Event Logistics

- Project Timeline and Details
- Event Logistics
- Conversation Planning

2:50-3:05: Evaluation and Requirements

- Data Collection
- Q&A

3:05-3:30: Closing

- Reminders
- Q&A
- Closing Circle

APPENDIX C: YEAR 2 SHORT FORM COMMUNITY CONVERSATION AGENDAS

Community Conversations Agenda

Overview: The Rural Action Project aims to create deeper connections and strengthen rural communities across Colorado. Communities will participate in a four-part conversation series. The first two meetings are designed to increase belonging and develop a shared understanding of community. The final two meetings will help communities co-create a project that responds to community needs and goals. After the conversations, communities will apply for a mini-grant and work together to implement a project in their home communities.

Meeting 1: Values, Visioning, and Asset Mapping

Objective: The first meeting will encourage community members to build trust with one another and excitement for working together. Participants will identify the values and assets important to their community and work together to envision a thriving community.

- **5:30-5:45: Arrivals** (15 minutes)
 - Distribute Entry Surveys
- **5:45-6:00: Welcome** (15 minutes)
 - Introduce Host Organization
 - Provide overview of Rural Action Project
 - Introduce participants to guidelines and data collection
- **6:00-6:25: Creating Connections** (25 minutes)
 - Small group conversation:
 - What's your name? Where did you grow up? Where do you live now?
 - What is our community doing well? What do you like about living here?
 - What concerns do you have about our community? What hopes do you have for our community's future?
 - Large group debrief
- **6:25-6:45: Values Sorting** (20 minutes)
 - On their own, participants rank community values
 - Small group conversation:
 - What is your top value and what does it mean to you?
 - What values do you think are most important for our community?
 - What would it look like for our community to achieve those values?
 - Groups should use the notetaking document to keep track of values that their group thinks are important.
 - Large group debrief
- **6:45-7:00: Small Group Asset Identification** (15 minutes)
 - Small groups develop a list of community assets, including:
 - Groups and Organizations
 - Places and Spaces
 - Culture

- **7:00-7:15: Large Group Asset Identification** (15 minutes)
 - Small groups report out to create a list of community assets, including:
 - Groups and Organizations
 - Places and Spaces
 - Culture
- **7:15-7:40: Visioning** (25 minutes)
 - Small group conversation:
 - What we still need to do. What are the people, places, or things we need to build or create to support a thriving community?
 - How might creating those things help our community thrive?
 - Large group debrief
- **7:40-7:55: Reflections** (15 minutes)
 - Small group discussion:
 - What is one thing you learned tonight?
 - What value do you want to reflect on over the next week?
 - Large group debrief
- **7:55-8:00: Closing** (5 minutes)
 - Preview next meeting
 - Homework: Think about the values that are important in our community. Try to look out for them. Where do you see people living those values? What does it look like in practice?
 - Collect data

Meeting 2: Storytelling and Needs Identification

Objectives: The second meeting will encourage community members to share their stories with one another and identify community needs. Participants will use a report card to evaluate community systems and begin to identify the types of changes they hope to make together.

- **5:30-5:45: Arrivals** (15 minutes)
- **5:45-5:55: Welcome** (10 minutes)
 - Review progress
 - Provide overview of agenda
 - Review guidelines and data collection
- **5:55-6:15: Connections** (20 minutes)
 - Small group conversation:
 - What's your name? Where did you grow up? Where do you live now?
 - What is one place in our community that you feel welcome? Why do you feel welcome there?
 - What values did you look out for? Where did you see those values in our community?
 - Large group debrief
- **6:15-6:35: Community Report Card and Gallery Walk** (20 minutes)

- Community Report Card: On their own, participants use the Community Report Card to give a grade (A-F) to systems in their community, like health, housing, and education.
- Post-it Activity: On their own, participants write down the one reason they think we need to change one of those systems. They then put their post-it on the Systems Posters posted around the room.
- Gallery walk: Participants walk around the room and read what other folks have written
- **6:35-7:05: Storytelling** (30 minutes)
 - Story writing: On their own, participants use the Story Worksheet to draft a story of a time they've faced a challenge in relation to one of those systems and the choices they made in the face of that challenge.
 - Story telling: At their tables, participants go around in a circle and share their stories.
- **7:05 - 7:20: Report Card continued** (15 minutes)
 - Report Card Revision: On their own, participants reflect on the stories they heard and revise the grades they initially wrote on their report card.
 - Small group conversation:
 - Which systems did you rate as doing poorly? Why?
 - Which systems are doing okay, but might do a lot better with a little nudge?
 - Which systems are most important for us to work on together?
 - Which systems offer the most opportunities for change?
 - Dot voting: Participants are each given two stickers. Participants place their stickers on the two systems they most want to address for their community project.
- **7:20 - 7:40: Brainstorming** (20 minutes)
 - Regroup participants into systems of interest based on the top two to three votes from the previous activity.
 - Small group conversation:
 - What would it look like to create change in that system?
 - What is a first step we could take towards creating real change in that system?
 - Large Group Debrief
- **7:40-7:55: Reflections** (15 minutes)
 - Small group discussion:
 - What is one thing you learned tonight?
 - What hopes do you have for our community's future?
 - Large group debrief
- **7:55-8:00: Closing** (5 minutes)
 - Preview next meeting
 - Homework: Think about the area of change. Where do you see opportunities? What might a better future look like for our community members?
 - Collect data

Night 3: Issue Prioritization and Project Identification

Objectives: The third meeting will help communities identify needs or goals to address for their community project and brainstorm potential solutions. Participants will work together to create potential projects and vote on which project they want to develop for their mini-grant proposal.

- **5:30-5:45: Arrivals** (15 minutes)
 - Group participants by top two or three systems identified during Meeting 3
- **5:45-5:55: Welcome** (10 minutes)
 - Review progress
 - Provide overview of agenda
 - Review guidelines and data collection
- **5:55-6:15: Connections** (20 minutes)
 - Small group conversation:
 - What's your name? Where did you grow up? Where do you live now?
 - What is one thing our community is known for or one thing you want our community to be known for?
 - What ideas did you come up with to address some of the challenges we face?
 - Large group debrief
- **6:15 - 6:45: Problem Identification** (30 minutes)
 - Small group discussion:
 - What are the problems in this system?
 - Who is most impacted?
 - What are the root causes?
 - What can we do about it?
 - Groups will try to decide on between 1-3 ideas to share with the large group. They will write each idea on a separate Big Idea Poster.
 - Large group report out: Each group briefly describes their big ideas.
- **6:45 - 7:00: Gallery Walk** (15 minutes)
 - Post Big Idea Posters around the room
 - Post-it activity. On their own, participants make notes on what big ideas might look like in practice or what impact it might have. They put their post-it on the corresponding Big Idea Posters.
 - Gallery Walk: Participants walk around the room and read others' ideas. They can continue to use post-its to add to previous comments.
 - Dot voting: Participants are each given three stickers. Participants place their stickers on the three Big Ideas that they most want to work on for their community project.
- **7:00-7:40 Idea Development** (40 minutes)
 - Reorganize groups into most popular ideas
 - Small group conversation:
 - What challenge does the idea address? Why is it important?
 - What strategies would we need to use to get this done? What would the project look like in practice?

- What would change look like? What would this project achieve?
 - Groups will describe their project on the Project Pitch Poster.
 - Large group pitch fest: Each group describes their project, why it is important, and what impacts they hope to achieve.
 - Dot voting: Participants are each given two stickers. Participants place their stickers on the three Big Ideas that they most want to work on for their community project.
 - Top project gets selected for development as mini grant
- **7:40-7:50: Reflections** (10 minutes)
 - Small group conversation:
 - What is one thing you learned tonight?
 - What hopes do you have for our project?
- **7:55-8:00: Closing** (5 minutes)
 - Preview next meeting
 - Homework: Think about what resources we might already have that we can use for our project. What can you contribute?
 - Collect data

Night 4: Project Development

Objectives: The final meeting will help communities develop and plan their community project. Participants will talk about the issue they hope to address through their project, identify stakeholders, and begin to plan their project.

- **5:30-5:45: Arrivals** (15 minutes)
- **5:45-5:55: Welcome** (10 minutes)
 - Review progress
 - Provide overview of agenda
 - Review guidelines and data collection
- **5:55-6:10: Connections** (15 minutes)
 - Small group conversation:
 - What's your name? Where did you grow up? Where do you live now?
 - What's something new about your community that you've learned over the last few conversations?
 - What's one hope you have for your community after tonight?
- **6:10-6:25: Understanding the Challenge** (15 minutes)
 - Review of chosen project
 - Small group conversation:
 - What is the challenge we want to address?
 - Why is it important to our community to address that challenge?
 - How has this challenge changed over time?
- **6:25-6:40: Visioning** (15 minutes)
 - Small group conversation:
 - What will success look like?
 - What strategies have already been tried in our community?

- What successes have we already had that we might build on?
 - Large Group Debrief
- **6:40-7:00: Stakeholder Identification** (20 minutes)
 - Small group conversation: Stakeholder Identification
 - Who is most impacted by this issue?
 - Who can do something about this issue?
 - Who is usually missing from this conversation but should be involved?
 - Large group report out: Create a list of potential stakeholders
- **7:00-7:20: Project Planning** (20 minutes)
 - Small group conversation:
 - What are the first steps that we need to take to achieve those goals?
 - What will we have to do over the long-term to achieve our goals?
 - What will we have to do to complete our project?
 - What barriers might stand in your way?
 - Large group report out: Create a collective timeline of the actions you might take
- **7:20-7:35: Resource Identification** (15 minutes)
 - Small group conversation:
 - What resources will we need for this work?
 - Of the stakeholder we identified, who might be able to offer some of those resources?
 - What resources will we still need?
- **7:35-7:50: Reflections and Project Sign Up** (15 minutes)
 - Small group discussion:
 - How might you contribute to this work?
 - What are your hopes for our work together?
 - What is one thing you will take away from this experience?
 - Participant Sign Up: Participants will identify if they want to play a role in further project development and implementation.
- **7:50-8:00: Closing** (10 minutes)
 - Thank participants
 - Distribute Evaluation Survey
 - Collect data

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