

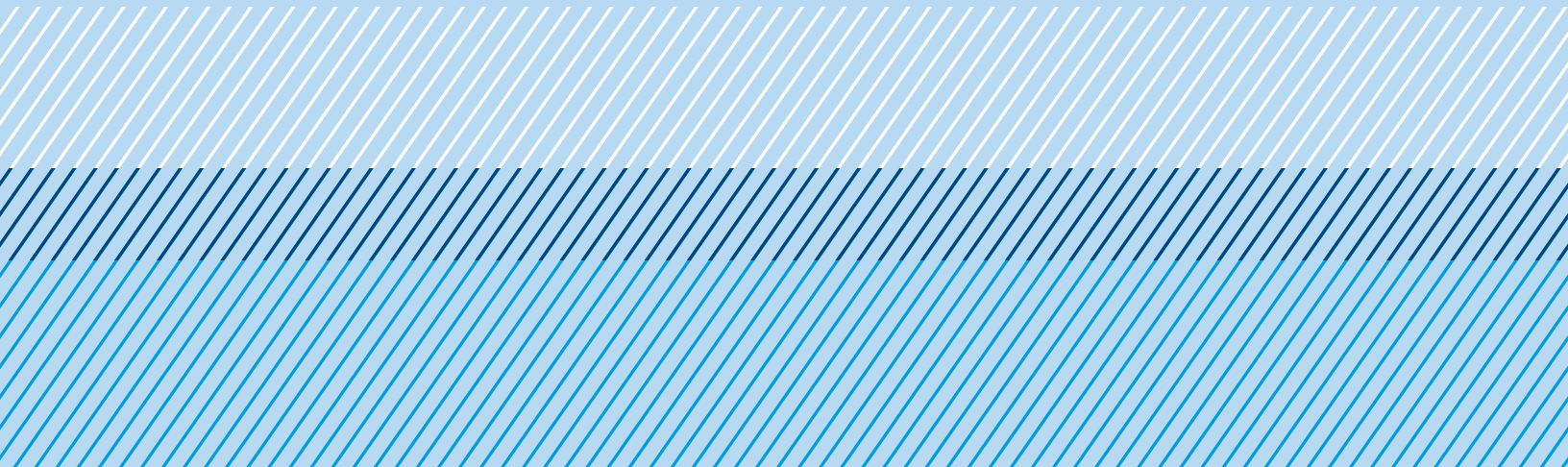


Case Studies: How Four Community Information Projects Went from Idea to Impact

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Revitalization in Central Wisconsin: How the Inccourage Community Foundation Used Information to Build Hope and Speed Community Change



To members of the rural communities of south Wood County, Wisconsin, the shrinking of local news reporting was not their highest concern. The large, locally owned paper mills that had buoyed the regional economy for more than a century had all significantly downsized between 2000 and 2010, with nearly 40 percent of total employment lost by 2005. Residents scrambled to find new jobs, but the few openings available required different skills than the ones they offered. Many younger employees left the area, leaving behind an aging workforce with specialized skills, looking for jobs that no longer existed.

These workforce problems topped the list of issues for Inccourage Community Foundation. But they weren't the only worry, for the dramatic changes in the paper industry had left a dearth of local leadership. As corporations exited, so did executives, their families and corporate philanthropies. The community depended on the mills for more than jobs; mill executives had been local leaders, serving as public officials and benefactors. The community was left with a pressing need to shift its culture and orientation – one that Inccourage hoped to help address but could certainly not meet alone.

With time, experimentation and the leadership of Inccourage's CEO, Kelly Ryan, it was understood that the best and most sustainable solution would be for community members to come up with a collective solution to their economic troubles. In order to catalyze community change, residents would need more robust communication channels with relevant local information flowing through them. And so, while Inccourage did not originally intend to tackle local news and information challenges in south Wood, the foundation and its partners eventually took it on, realizing that information was critical to the broader strategy of catalyzing transformative change in this hard-hit community.

A Community in Crisis

Wisconsin, once the headquarters for some of the world's largest paper mills, lost 35 percent of its paper mill jobs between 2000 and 2010. In south Wood County, the decline was sudden and steep when its locally owned mill, Consolidated Papers Inc., was sold to a multinational corporation and downsized. Consolidated Papers had provided well-paying jobs since 1864. Changes in mill ownership ended a tacit arrangement whereby mill owners did more than provide employment; the community depended upon the company for leadership and philanthropy. Said long-time resident and Inourage board member Helen Jungwirth: "We inherited a paternalistic culture, and with that came a strong sense of entitlement as well as dependency on others to find solutions and get things done."

"What happened in the paper industry was really traumatic, and the effect in the community was significant."

Resident of south Wood County

When the mill downsized, the information landscape in south Wood also shifted. For decades, residents had relied on The Daily Tribune and a local radio station for community news. The Daily Tribune was an afternoon daily that published eight full sections and enjoyed a paid circulation of 14,000 – once considered high for a region populated by about 40,000. Consolidated Papers also produced a widely read company newsletter, News Chips, which included general community information and job listings. Because television broadcasting from Wausau, 60 miles to the north, rarely covered south Wood news in depth, residents had relied on these local outlets. After 2000, a single publisher purchased the Daily Tribune, along with other local papers in the county, and reduced south Wood news to a single page. And despite appeals from residents to restore local coverage, the paper's attention to south Wood continued to decline; soon local circulation was down 63 percent. In addition, the new mill owners halted publication of News Chips as part of its downsizing.



South Wood County

Population: 44,778, distributed between 13 towns, villages and cities

Largest city: Wisconsin Rapids

Median household income: \$51,301

Declining manufacturing sector:
32% of jobs lost since 2000

Readers of The Daily Tribune expressed frustration that the newspaper, like the mill, had set their community's needs aside. A former publisher recalled,

"With so many people unemployed, there was a heightened demand for reliable information about the local economy, about jobs and prospects for a recovery. We knew our readers needed that regular coverage, but the decline in local news was part of a larger adjustment in our industry. There wasn't much we could do."

At the time of the sale of the company and subsequent mill closures, elected representatives in south Wood admitted they were unprepared to deal with economic challenges of this magnitude. As a Wisconsin Rapids councilman said, "We were a ship adrift."

An Information Strategy is Born

Given the significance of the economic crisis, Incourage and the Wisconsin Rapids Chamber of Commerce came together to discuss how they could create greater impact. They forged a close partnership and created a vision for shifting the culture in south Wood so that people could more easily help themselves and each other. It soon became clear to the broader community that the relative handful of institutions that remained in south Wood could not alone reverse the effects of the economic downturn. What was needed was a shift from the expectation that “someone else will take care of it” to a more participatory approach that supported an informed and engaged citizenry.

Change isn’t easy, even in the best of times. So to foster new relationship and leadership skills among community members, Incourage invited experts from Ki ThoughtBridge, a consulting firm, to provide adaptive skills training based on ideas developed by Harvard’s Negotiation Project. The goal was to equip leaders with skills for promoting citizen engagement in community problem solving.¹ More than 100 residents from all sectors of the community were coached through the initiative.

The central premise of the training was that if local residents were to become more effective leaders and address complex issues, they would need to build trust. This was especially difficult because many residents were experiencing symptoms of loss – confusion, apathy, cynicism and anger – due to their economic troubles. Such powerful emotions could block progress. Better communication was an antidote to these obstacles and a key to building trust.

From Individual to Collective Change

Witnessing the power of these intensely personal communication skills, Incourage began to consider how communications and information could contribute to creating a healthier civic culture.

Incourage Community Foundation

Established: 1994

Location: South Wood County, Wisconsin

Asset size: \$30 million

Staff: 16

Key goals:

- Turn everyday people into everyone’s leaders
- Support a new economy that works for all people
- Increase access to information across the digital divide
- Create partnerships that intensify impact for the community

At that same time, Incourage learned about the Knight Community Information Challenge (KCIC), and the ideas began to spark for Ryan and her board.

Incourage originally planned to use KCIC resources to create an online news outlet to fill the gap left by the shrinking local newspaper. However, based on what she and her board chair – a retired Gannett publisher – learned about the digital divide at a media seminar sponsored by Knight Foundation², Incourage decided to temporarily set this idea aside, realizing that an online source would not reach the intended audience and could conceivably marginalize residents without Internet access. Instead, Incourage initiated a survey and series of focus groups to better understand how residents obtained information and what kinds of content they needed or wanted. A Digital Divide Survey conducted in 2009 revealed how residents accessed and used computers and the Internet. Subsequent focus groups addressed a

¹ A detailed description of this unique curriculum developed by Katherine Tyler Scott and Irma Tyler-Wood of Ki ThoughtBridge can be found in the summer 2012 edition of the National Civic Review.

² Incourage’s CEO Kelly Ryan and board Chair Helen Jungwirth attended the Knight Foundation’s Media Learning Seminar in 2009.

broader range of topics and gave participants the opportunity to explore and identify local information resources and gaps.

Incourage was committed to ensuring that its community conversations were inclusive.³ So with support from MIT's Center for Civic Media, they conducted focus groups to document the information needs of low-income residents and unemployed workers. In all, more than 800 people offered their perspectives on the quality and accessibility of information in their community. Important insights emerged:

- Information flows were shifting and fragmented. People relied increasingly on family, friends and colleagues for community news and information after the newspaper coverage dwindled. Often, either everyone had heard of a particular resource, or no one had. Critical information about local services appeared to be circulating in relatively closed social networks.⁴
- Online access was increasing in south Wood County, but more than a third of low income families surveyed did not use the Internet. Nearly 55 percent of low income residents between the ages of 18 and 24 did not have a computer at home, and unemployed mill workers often had limited computer skills.
- Local service organizations increasingly relied on alternate means of reaching people. Examples included collaborating with schools to place flyers in children's backpacks and posting notices in local coffee shops.

"We didn't start with an expansive understanding of information. It was a process of dynamic learning for us linked to a conversation about culture."

Kelly Ryan

CEO, Incourage Community Foundation

Incourage's early involvement with the community showed how information can catalyze citizen engagement, and how engagement can lead to greater information consumption. They saw residents share concerns about conditions in their community; come forward with ideas to solve community problems; be heard by community leaders and by each other; and become motivated to find and use more accurate, relevant information in their decision making.

Through the focus groups, more than 80 residents stepped forward to help develop solutions to address community information challenges. Examples include "tech days" promoted by a focus group participant who later gathered information about the demand for computer classes in her area and worked with library leaders and the foundation to create them. "I saw folks go from small, (not believing their ideas made a difference), to big (my ideas can make a difference and I want to learn more)," recalls Incourage's Liz Everson. In her view, catalyzing this "virtuous cycle" is a crucial component of Incourage's work because it challenges old habits of disengagement. Says CEO Kelly Ryan: "It is promoting culture change – residents begin to understand that they have power and can make a difference."

³ Survey and focus group research included people of different ages, income and employment status.

⁴ This is consistent with the observations of sociologists like Mark Granovetter who find that people with strong ties tend to know the same things. Weak ties or "bridges" that link network clusters are needed to discover new information.

Three Pillars of Community Revitalization: Access, Capacity, Engagement

Based on what it learned from the Digital Divide Survey and focus groups, Incourage invested in a range of projects to increase the availability of local information, build people's capacity to access information and support civic engagement. Incourage created an advisory committee to partner with the foundation and learn from its information-related investments. Chaired by an Incourage board member, the committee included representatives from the area's K-12 school systems, libraries, a senior citizens association, the local technical college, as well as the director of technology of the largest K-12 system in the area and an information technology specialist from the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point.



Access: Supporting the expansion of Nixle

Incourage expanded access to local information through Nixle, the national platform for police and public safety advocates. The service sends alert messages to residents via SMS, email and the Web about neighborhood-level issues, including public safety and health concerns. Incourage learned that Nixle was used locally by the Wood County Dispatch Center, but the foundation's focus groups showed that most south Wood residents had not heard of the service. Incourage expanded use of Nixle in south

“We read the Knight Commission Report early on and it was hugely influential. We continue to think about access, capacity and engagement as core components of our information approach.”

Kelly Ryan
CEO, Incourage Community Foundation

Wood, bringing the Nixle service new partners such as K-12 schools, area hospitals, the health department and the United Way. Now the expanded service includes updates on education, health and community issues as well public safety announcements.

Incourage also funded a Nixle public awareness campaign in 2011. Nixle users in south Wood County have since increased ten-fold, from 600 to 6,335 subscribers – including more than 3,000 residents who follow Nixle on Facebook. Nixle updates also are now embedded in 16 message boards on local websites. The number of messages released through Nixle varies depending on need, from five or more daily messages during emergencies to as few as one or two times per week.

Nixle provides timely, actionable information to residents. For instance, in October 2012 when an elderly driver, who suffered from dementia, was reported missing an alert message was sent out over Nixle with a description of the vehicle. With the help of a Nixle subscriber, the woman was safely found in less than an hour.



Capacity: Building residents' digital technology skills

Incourage's advisory committee members, including representatives from schools, technical colleges and libraries, worked together to create enhanced digital literacy curricula that built on basic skills courses. With Incourage's support, two communities (Rudolph and Port Edwards) that lacked libraries and viable Internet access points used their schools as a home base for new computer and Internet labs. Residents in these communities, including 6,000 school children, now have free access to a computer and can connect to the Internet. The foundation also supported libraries in south Wood to provide extended access to computers, free computer training and digital literacy classes for all residents.

Engagement: Connecting new information with existing workforce development programs

To address pressing workforce issues plaguing the community, Incourage had invested deeply in creating Workforce Central, a National Fund for Workforce Solutions site and a multisector workforce training initiative to serve south Wood businesses and workers. Through the early focus groups it conducted in its KCIC project, the foundation recognized gaps in how organizations that served job seekers shared information with each other and with potential workers. Incourage also saw opportunities to connect local agencies, organizations and businesses and

enable them to share information on how education and support services for job seekers can be more efficiently integrated and aligned with employer needs. Thus, the foundation began to intentionally map and use information in its systems change work.

This has resulted in simple fixes, such as an agreement from the city of Wisconsin Rapids to lower transportation costs for trainees who attend classes at a local technical college, to more complex collaborations, such as the launch of a new shared curriculum on specific training for locally available jobs. Greater awareness about the connections between access to information and job growth has also prompted Workforce Central partners to incorporate digital literacy into credential training for under- and unemployed workers, including former mill workers with limited computer skills.

In the summer of 2012, Incourage also launched a new information platform called What's Up. Designed by the MIT Media Lab, What's Up aggregates and disseminates news from local calendars about events, job training and community services. The information is made available through online postings as well as SMS messages, physical digital signs, telephone hotlines, and posters and paper flyers in public places like grocery stores and job centers. Twenty local service providers have registered to post announcements with What's Up, and Workforce Central service providers have distributed nearly 1,000 informational cards to raise awareness among their clients about the new information service. Since the online component launched in June 2012, traffic to the What's Up site has been limited so far, with 137 monthly unique visitors in October.

"Data alone cannot make a community stronger, but a shared understanding of what data tells us about local life, and how it is changing, can start a conversation."

Kelly Ryan
CEO, Incourage Community Foundation

Engagement: Community surveys and conversations

In the fall of 2011, Incourage developed and later launched a survey asking residents about the challenges facing their community, local strengths and their vision for the future. The survey was administered through telephone interviews, online and print surveys and in-person community meetings. Since March of 2012, over 75 community conversations have been hosted with more than 500 people involved. Perhaps the most important outcome of the conversations was that residents were actively inspired to participate. Many reported with surprise that, in some cases, their least-engaged neighbors and friends turned up at public meetings. "Several people in the community conversations came from organizations that I had not seen participate before," observed one resident.

In a related effort, Incourage invested in "Vital Signs," a community indicators project that for the first time aggregated sub-county-level data on issues such as employment, homelessness, child care and wages. A condensed summary reflecting a decade of local information was distributed in early 2011 to 2,000 residents and organizations. In July 2012, Incourage partnered with UW – Madison's Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS) to reformat Vital Signs as a discussion document and present it to municipal leaders, media, businesses, social service agencies, the local technical college and K-12 schools. Since then the indicators have been used in many venues, including by the Wisconsin Rapids municipal government and county government, and by local businesses for planning, and by schools and community colleges as a teacher orientation tool.



Workforce Central

In 2008, Incourage Community Foundation initiated Workforce Central as a strategic, systems-change effort to address the growing workforce and economic challenges facing south Wood. The program offers workforce training through a partnership between employers, government, philanthropy and educational and service providers. Workforce Central in south Wood County is one of only two rural National Fund for Workforce Solutions sites in the United States.

A Community in Transition

In the last four years, Incourage and its partners have contributed to a more diverse and robust information ecosystem in south Wood County. New information resources are now available and in more forms: online, offline, via digital signs and SMS and voice messages. The foundation's investments in local libraries and schools have increased residents' access to computers and the Internet, and their skills necessary to participate in an increasingly digital economy. Perhaps most important, the process of gathering and sharing information appears to have had a positive impact on the cultural environment. The overwhelming response rate for the community survey launched in 2012 is a sign that large numbers of south Wood residents are now ready to contribute to a broad-based community process: more than 4,100 residents completed the survey, and 59 percent of residents reported being interested in participating in future discussions to help develop a community plan. "Five years ago, this kind of thing would have been unthinkable," noted one resident. Hearing that more than 4,000 people took the survey, another observed, "We feel now that we need to make things happen. Before, we felt like someone else would take care of it."

"It used to be that we sat back and waited for information to be delivered to our doorstep. We have a long way to go, but people are now leaning forward. Leaning forward to answer a survey, leaning forward to learn from the results, asking - what part can I do?"

Resident of south Wood County

Finally, a key result of Incourage's efforts is an information ecosystem that is less reliant on a few dominant sources. "What we learned along the way," observes Ryan, "is that information has its own ecosystem and reflects the culture of a community ... in order to upend a culture that is paternal, dependent and with a strong sense of entitlement, you have to include information in your change strategy."



Next Steps

Incourage's community survey revealed several priority areas, including fostering creative thinking and new ideas, strengthening the local economy and creating new opportunities for young adults and families.

The foundation will now focus on grassroots efforts, providing community organizing training for residents as well as for foundation board members and staff.

Recently, Incourage purchased the old Daily Tribune building, which the newspaper had vacated due to downsizing. The foundation's vision is to restore and convert the building into a "town square" for civic discourse and engagement, turning it into a lasting symbol of the shifts under way in south Wood. Located on the riverfront in an area once dominated and controlled by paper mills, the best use of the facility will be determined through a community planning process.



Daily Tribune building to become a center of civic discourse and engagement

Lessons Learned

Over the last decade, Incourage has moved away from traditional responsive grant making approaches and toward making use of all of its resources – human, financial and reputational – to actively catalyze change. In the process, it has developed a much more nuanced understanding of information’s role in communities and, in particular, of the role information can play in promoting social change.

“In systems change, you have some levers. Information is one of them.”

Kelly Ryan
CEO, Incourage Community Foundation

Lesson 1: Take an open and participatory approach, and model it.

Incourage began its work to address the challenges of shrinking local news by acknowledging it didn’t have a solution. Instead it embraced a consultative role, partnering with local service providers and businesses, and engaging residents through surveys, focus groups and discussions to map their news environment and identify shortfalls. Facilitating these exchanges promoted individual participation, helped identify and build on existing community assets (such as the Nixle dispatch platform and local workforce collaborative) and challenged the dominant local culture of paternalism and dependency.

Lesson 2: Ask the experts.

The advice of partners and external experts was pivotal in Incourage’s journey. At various times, consultations with the leaders of other place-based foundations, community development experts and with Knight Foundation through the KCIC helped to focus thinking. Incourage’s work with the MIT Center for Civic Media influenced its understanding of the personal and practical as well as the deeper communal information needs of the south Wood community. And since some of Incourage’s investments have been in technologies that are experimental in the south Wood context, Incourage’s ongoing relationship with MIT brought needed technical expertise.

Lesson 3: Advance on all fronts: access, capacity and engagement.

Not every community has information deficits in all three of these areas, but they are interconnected. In order for citizens to use information productively, whether in private or in public roles, reliable information must be available, citizens must be able to make effective use of it; and relevant information should be made public so it can be deliberated openly. In south Wood’s case, there has been substantial progress on each of these fronts.

Lesson 4: Focus on the demand as well as supply.

Nurturing demand for accurate, relevant information may be more challenging than ensuring supply. Incourage’s work on the supply side was relatively straightforward, whereas its work on the “demand side” was more challenging, in part due to prevailing social norms. The foundation’s strategy has been to boost citizens’ appetites for information by seeding substantive and useful knowledge into community deliberations.

Lesson 5: Think long-term.

Community foundations are uniquely positioned to take a long-term view and Incourage is using this as a strategic advantage, betting that investments in creating and sustaining a healthy information ecosystem will pay off in the form of more effective community change.

About

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

Knight Foundation supports transformational ideas that promote quality journalism, advance media innovation, engage communities and foster the arts. We believe that democracy thrives when people and communities are informed and engaged.

More at knightfoundation.org.

The Knight Community Information Challenge engages community and place-based foundations in meeting local information needs, helping them increase their impact on issues they care about.

More at informationneeds.org.

FSG

FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation and research, founded in 2000 as Foundation Strategy Group. Today, FSG works across sectors in every region of the globe – partnering with foundations, corporations, nonprofits and governments to develop more effective solutions to the world’s most challenging issues. FSG brings together leaders that are hungry to exchange information, elevate learning and to create collective impact in discovering better ways to solve the world’s most difficult social problems. In the field of learning and evaluation, FSG has significant client and thought leadership experience. FSG’s approach focuses on the use of evaluation as a management tool to improve decision making and increase social impact. We use traditional as well as innovative data-collection approaches to determine the various effects and impacts an organization’s efforts have produced over time – always with the purpose of informing and improving strategy and program implementation.

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