

**In what ways do I belong to my community?
In what ways do I create belonging in my community?**

Building Resilient Rural Communities Belonging Through Bridging

This work is rooted in the experiences of the people who live in rural places in Iowa and in the time and the care they put into their communities. It grows out of what people in these rural places have already done for the quality of life in their communities, what they find challenging, and the ideas they have for the future.

We've collected best practices from our six partner communities through listening to community members and observing them. They taught us that investment in the relational is the most important ingredient to a thriving rural community. Relationships, big and small, are the heart of rural communities. Thank you to all those in Bancroft, Corning, Elma, Everly, Mt. Ayr, and Sac City for all your time, energy and experience building community.

Through this project, our work has found that while a shrinking population is often seen as a sign of rural community decline, communities can experience an increase in their quality of life even as the community declines in population. This decouples the ideas of community decline and population loss. As rural communities face difficulties that aren't fully in their control, population loss often being one of them, they can do something about the quality of life experienced by their residents. Relationship building is one way people in rural places can help their communities thrive.

Through our research we have come to focus on the process of *building belonging through bridging*. Belonging we can often sense. Bridging is a type of social capital between people who come together for a common project, interest or goal. It's different from bonding, another kind of social capital, which is built on shared identities and is already strong in rural communities.

Building belonging through bridging is what we're working towards, so where do we begin?

**Why do I care about my place?
What is good about the place I call home?**

To begin this process we ask individuals, groups and the community to ‘*acknowledge the good.*’ This active moment of departure asks you to consider the ways in which the place you call home contributes to your quality of life. It may be based on your experience and history within the community or a simple acknowledgement of why you choose to stay in your rural place.

Community development that begins by taking stock of your skills and potential contributions is asset based community development. To ‘acknowledge the good’ comes before any inventory of assets and can influence what is even considered a community asset. It is an acknowledgement of anything we find good about our community, but as a starting point it helps us locate the experiences of community that are less tangible, and are at times harder to name.

**How do I participate in my community?
How do I create a sense of belonging in my community?**

Between acknowledging the good and building belonging through bridging ‘*the how matters.*’ Community efforts are often based on what we are building, getting, or doing for the community. This work, however, focuses us on how we gather, build, and go about our daily lives.

As we bridge with those who have a common project, interest or goal, the way you build a sense of community is just as or more important than what brought you together. Focusing on how we come together strengthens a spirit of generosity and builds trust. Building and maintaining relationships ensures that no matter the outcome of your current project, there is a sense of good will that can be leveraged towards something new. It is cyclical.

This is the goal of ‘the how matters.’ The ways in which people exist in their community, feel about their community, and participate in their community in small, almost invisible ways matters. These small actions build on each other to create a culture of trust and build the foundation for belonging.

About the Project: *In this National Science Foundation funded project, we explore small and shrinking rural communities in Iowa that have been able to protect quality of life and community services for their residents even as they lose population. We call this Rural Shrink Smart.*

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NSF Smart & Connected Communities Grants, #1736718 & #1952007

Overcoming the Rural Data Deficit to Improve Quality of Life and
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