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Foundations and Applications of Theory in the First Impressions Program

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Abstract

The First Impressions program was designed to help communities learn about their strengths and shortcomings through the "fresh eyes" of first-time visitors. This Extension-led community assessment program has been implemented in over 500 communities since the 1990s, yet scant literature exists regarding the program's theoretical foundations or best practices for implementation or evaluation. To address increasing interest in the program among Extension professionals nationwide, we aim to encourage new scholarship regarding the program's use and impacts by providing an overview of how the program works; a discussion of theoretical foundations of the program from geography, urban planning, and psychology literature; and suggestions for improving program efficacy.

Keywords: First Impressions, community exchange, community assessment, tourism, placemaking

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Introduction

The First Impressions program was designed to help communities learn about their strengths and shortcomings through the "fresh eyes" of first-time visitors. Developed in 1991 by Andrew Lewis, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, and James Schneider, Grant County, Wisconsin, Economic Development Director, the

program involves a structured secret-shopper-type community exchange that provides outsider perspectives on a community's appearance, services, assets, and infrastructure. The program includes elements of traditional needs assessments (Watkins, Leigh, Platt, & Kaufman, 1998) and asset-based community development strategies (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Although over 503 communities in the states of Arkansas, Connecticut, Kansas, Kentucky, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin as well as several Canadian provinces are known to have implemented First Impressions (Figure 1), little scholarship exists regarding its theoretical basis or broader impacts. Two articles have been published about the program (Nix, Eades, & Frost, 2013; Ohnoutka & Hughes, 2002), and to our knowledge no others. In this article, we seek to fill this gap in scholarship and encourage new scholarship regarding the program's use and impacts by presenting a study of theoretical foundations and applications related to the program.

Figure 1.

Known Communities That Have Completed a First Impressions Program

Source: University of Connecticut Extension. Retrieved August 25, 2017, from https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=zzhHqWZPOgBk.kXLLEKLGPj2w

Note: Not all participating states submitted completed reports for this map.

This work is important and timely for two main reasons. First, there is growing interest from Extension programs nationwide regarding implementing the program as a low-cost community assessment tool, but in some cases, lack of theoretical foundation is a barrier to adopting it (C. Messer, personal communication, May 9, 2016). In 2015, the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development (NERCRD) funded a face-to-face peer training for Extension colleagues interested in "exporting" or "importing" the First Impressions program, including in the states of Connecticut, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Vermont, and West Virginia (Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, n.d.). Discussions and insights from that training were inspirations for this article. Second, the theoretical foundations described herein serve as a first step in understanding existing program structures and making programmatic improvements. A national interview study conducted in 2017 by three

members of our author team revealed that entities implementing First Impressions experience some challenge related to effectively evaluating programmatic impacts (Brown, Faulkner, & Kelly, 2017). A theoretical framework provides a base for understanding similarities and differences between programs, including opportunities for aggregating program impacts across regions and nationally and improving program evaluation tools. Other relevant insights from that national interview study are cited herein.

We begin with background regarding how the First Impressions program works. In the next section, we present a literature review and theoretical foundations supporting four critical elements of the program: engagement of community volunteers, participant reflection, walking as the primary mode of transportation, and the use of images. To ground the theoretical foundations, we provide examples to further elucidate how theories are applied and discussion of their drawbacks and benefits. We conclude the article with a critical review of the program and suggestions for improving efficacy and training components based on theory and discussions with Extension professionals involved in the NERCRD training.

Background

When communities participate in a traditional First Impressions program, they are matched with an exchange community that is of similar size or has similar characteristics. Teams of five to eight people are chosen or volunteer to participate on the visit team, typically representing a diverse cross-section of the community, including business owners, community leaders, planners or economic developers, media, young people, and retirees. Some states employ an expert-based model (or a model involving a combination of experts and local volunteers), in which professionals in tourism or economic development are recruited to provide expertise during the visit (Brown et al., 2017). Each team agrees to make an unannounced visit to the exchange community and record observations. Prior to the visit, participants may be asked to request information about the partner community or to do online research.

Participants typically receive training and follow reporting guidelines, often using a paper-based participant guide. The guide serves as a tool for bringing attention to aspects of the community that could be indicators of change and opportunity and that might otherwise go unnoticed. Three types of data are typically collected: (a) qualitative comments based on the visitor's experiences, reflection, or discussion with other team members; (b) ratings (numerical or grading); and (c) notes about photographs taken. The scope of questions included in the guide varies by state depending on the intended outcomes, but observations are generally made regarding the following aspects of the community: retail, tourism, housing, business and economy, education, health, social and emergency services, government, infrastructure and land use, recreation, faith, and culture (Brown et al., 2017). As an example, the Connecticut First Impressions program guide was updated from the original Wisconsin guide (University of Connecticut Extension, 2016). Copies of individual state program guides can be obtained by contacting the program directors through the websites listed in the "Recommendations for Further Reading" section of this article. Participants are encouraged to take part in community activities, engage residents in conversation, share observations with one another and take time to reflect during and following the visit. After the visits are complete, program coordinators compile observations and provide a final report that includes observations, comments, and photos (Figure 2). Results may also be shared through a town-hall-style public meeting or informal dialogues with participating teams. Such meetings and dialogues often include recommendations for improvement and asset development, including ideas for increasing aesthetic appeal, and discussion about broader community processes (University of Connecticut Extension, n.d.; University of Wisconsin Extension, 2012).

Figure 2.

Sample First Impressions Program Community Reports

The traditional program model described above and first implemented by the University of Wisconsin has been adapted from state to state to meet program and community goals. The purpose of the aforementioned national interview research project was to uncover similarities and differences in program outcomes and ways in which the programs are designed, implemented, and evaluated (Brown et al., 2017). In interviews with 10 directors of First Impressions programs, interviewees noted several features of the program that have contributed to its success and ease of adaptation (Brown et al., 2017). These include engagement of community volunteers, participant reflection, walking, and the use of images (Brown et al., 2017). Below, we explore these unique features in more depth, providing a theoretical framework that draws from geography, urban planning, and psychology literature, and we identify challenges in applying these elements practically.

Theoretical Foundations and Applications

A primary program element that has existed since the inception of the First Impressions exchange model is the participation of volunteers who provide an outsider perspective on the partner community. It is this foundational component that allows the program to be implemented in underresourced communities with low start-up costs (Brown et al., 2017). The importance of an outsider perspective is supported in both geography and tourism literature. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) made a distinction between visitors, for whom a landscape is novel, and residents, who may be dulled by familiarity or are too deeply invested in their environment to remain objective. He explained that "[the visitor's] main contribution is the fresh perspective" (Tuan, 1974, p. 63). Although native residents provide valuable, complex perspectives on a community, they are also habituated to many aspects of their surroundings, "inured to the "merits and defects" that are readily apparent to visitors' (Tuan, 1974, p. 65). Social exchange and acculturation theories from tourism development literature support the idea of the positive impact visitors can create through exchange. Social exchange theory posits that when visits occur, there is automatically a reflexive exchange of information. Differences between communities (for example, in terms of business development or downtown design elements) create opportunities for "acculturation" by which one community adapts practices and techniques of the other. In this respect, the exchange can be used to incite constructive change (Beeton, 2006).

Although community volunteers bring unique backgrounds and perspectives to a First Impressions team, use of the volunteer exchange model also creates challenges. Inexperienced volunteers may be skewed toward observing features with historic or entertainment value, failing to note important physical evidence of community development or decline. Their observations may be viewed as superficial (Tuan, 1974). Practically, several states in the national research study found working with residents in a community exchange model to be programmatically prohibitive, citing difficulty in finding partner communities, challenges in providing uniform training, and inadequate funding and payment mechanisms to reimburse participants for travel and overnight costs, which may be significant in large states (Brown et al., 2017). The states of Kentucky, Michigan, and New Hampshire have developed hybrid programs that include a mix of targeted outside state specialists, students, or a pool of peers with expertise in areas of community interest (Brown et al., 2017).

The process of individual and group reflection is a second essential element common among First Impressions programs. By reflecting on what they have seen, participants act as more than recorders of information. Ong's (2000) claim that knowledge is constructed in context suggests that reflection in situ offers the greatest value for First Impressions participants. Several *Journal of Extension* articles addressing experiential learning theories (e.g., Franz, 2007; Torock, 2009) emphasize the importance of reflection in assisting participants in not only digesting what they have seen but also integrating such with their own experience and knowledge. The latter action is important not just for individual learning but also for generating action items that have a greater likelihood of being implemented. As Franz (2007) pointed out, "Groups that engage in critical reflection could be more inclusive, learn as a group, raise their awareness of change issues, and be collaborative and democratic in their approach to the change process" ("Implications for Extension Transformation"). Ideally, participants are asked why elements of the community are as they seem, how elements are connected, and what these patterns represent. Authors such as Clay (1987) and Jacobs (1985) provide support for this element of the program, instructing observers to be aware of building size and location, quality of construction, land use patterns, and density as evidence of broader community processes (Jacobs, 1985, pp. 31–52). Practically, participants reflect during their visit as they take notes in the participant guide. This activity is encouraged through questions such as "In what ways was the community different from what you expected?" and "Has this experience given you any new ideas about your community?" Group reflection sometimes happens naturally during the drive home or in a restaurant or coffee shop where participants meet during their visit day. Several states also encourage informal discussions between the visit teams where members can "share what they have learned in a welcoming space" (Brown et al., 2017, from G. Sewake & C. Hancock, personal communication, July 25, 2017) in addition to public meetings or forums where results can be shared and action items suggested.

The third programmatic element we explore is the action of walking. Although many First Impressions programs encourage visitors to view various community entrances through driving, participants generally walk as the primary mode of exploration. William Whyte (1988), whose seminal work explored the social behavior of urban residents, referred to the pedestrian as a "marvelously complex and efficient . . . transportation unit" (p. 56) and noted the superior adaptability and maneuverability of the pedestrian—characteristics that are valuable for navigating and surveying a community. Research has shown that our brains apprehend the physical environment most directly when we are pedestrians (Appleyard, 1970; Lee, 1964). This direct contact with surroundings facilitates the process of observation and attention to detail (Fink, 2012). In the context of a community assessment, walking leads to serendipitous exploration of paths, gathering places, and landmarks that may otherwise be known only to locals (Lynch, 1960).

Indeed, most First Impressions program leaders see walking through the community as "a key element" of the

program (Brown et al., 2017, from G. Wise, personal communication, August 3, 2017) or as "absolutely mandatory" during a visit (Brown et al., 2017, from C. Messer, personal communication August 15, 2017). The First Impressions guide is a tool for facilitating such exploration, and participants are asked to engage all of their senses while they walk through the community and answer questions such as "What do you smell?" and "What do you hear?" Although First Impressions is not designed specifically to assess factors related only to walkability, the ability of a visiting team to gather information through walking may have an impact on their overall perceptions of the community. There is a significant and growing body of research regarding links between various community design elements and walkability, and this research is garnering increasing interest from policy makers and planners concerned with transportation, safety, and public health (Adkins, Dill, Luhr, & Neal, 2012; Ewing & Handy, 2009; Gilderbloom, Riggs, & Meares, 2015; Mehta, 2008; Rogers, Halstead, Gardner, & Carlson, 2011).

The final element of First Impressions programs we explore is the use of images. Photography has been an important component of First Impressions since the program's inception, serving as both a way to document the visiting team's experience and a way to communicate key findings. Photographic methods that relate visualization to place have been well developed in various disciplines as vehicles for increasing understanding of how residents give meaning to space and for facilitating empowerment and policy development (Fink, 2012). Originally a technique applied in anthropologic research, photography is most often applied as an empowerment tool for residents themselves, allowing them to reflect on the circumstances of their lives and communities (Purcell, 2007). Photography as a research element may be particularly useful in situations where discussions or interviews alone are insufficient in revealing layers of meaning (Trell & Van Hoven, 2010).

Many First Impressions programs apply a "reverse lens" to this method, allowing the visiting team to use photography as a way to capture what they see and feel during their visit. Given that an underlying assumption of the First Impressions program is that residents' own perceptions may have been dulled by familiarity, visualizations through photography open up an important way of communicating what is meaningful from the outsider's perspective. Photographs serve an important role in shaping how and what the visiting team members learn, from the visit through the "debrief," as well as how the results are communicated to community members. Because the program focuses on a self-led walking experience, visiting teams are able to experience and document small details that might otherwise be overlooked but may have a significant effect on how a place is experienced by outsiders (Fink, 2012). If we consider that learning is influenced by emotion and cognition, statistics may be important in convincing community leaders that particular problems should be addressed, but visual information may be more effective in achieving attention and action (Fink, 2012; Lorenz & Kolb, 2009). Some First Impressions programs are exploring the integration of additional visual elements, such as the ESRI's Collector for ArcGIS mapping tool and story mapping (Brown et al., 2017).

Implications and Conclusions

The First Impressions program provides a unique perspective that may not otherwise be part of a typical community development or planning process. It does, however, have important limitations. The program's key elements—efficiency, low cost, and minimal participant commitment—also limit its scope and impact. On the basis of our analysis and discussions with NERCRD grant participants implementing the program, we encourage communities to consider the recommendations we convey here.

First, the program may be more impactful when integrated into robust and long-term programs for community placemaking, tourism, planning, and development. As an example, Minnesota adapted elements of the First Impressions program for use within a more comprehensive community tourism assessment program (Brown et

al., 2017). If, on the other hand, First Impressions is offered as a stand-alone program, educators can reflect with community participants on how the results of the program can be integrated into existing community planning efforts and long-term initiatives. Recommendations and outcomes from the First Impressions program may take years to come to fruition; as one program leader noted, "It's like planting seeds and watching them grow into trees; it doesn't happen overnight" (Brown et al., 2017, from A. Northrop, personal communication, July 17, 2017).

A second and related program improvement involves providing robust training elements to hone the observer's lens. Many of the references cited in this article are seminal works that provide a foundation for placemaking principles. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS), founded on the scholarship of Whyte, is well known for its work in placemaking development and offers a template for placemaking education (Project for Public Spaces, 2009). PPS defines placemaking as "a collaborative process by which we can shape our public realm in order to maximize shared value" and explains that "more than just promoting better urban design, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution" (Project for Public Spaces, 2009, para. 1). Several states have developed significant placemaking curricula offered through the Extension system (Grabow, 2016; Neumann, 2015). Incorporating principles addressed in such curricula into the First Impressions program, either before a community visit or after, may provide participants with guidance in terms of what to look for and how to implement changes in their own communities.

We also encourage participants to engage in a reflective process with holistic thinking and peer discussion as integrated parts of the program. As currently implemented, the First Impressions program may provide a compartmentalized perspective, directing participants to observe the community in segments, without necessarily requiring them to consider how these parts form a whole or what they reveal about ongoing changes. Expansion beyond this compartmentalized approach might be implemented through intentional and guided discussions or debriefs during and after a visit. This strategy also provides a disarming environment for questioning and critique that may not be achieved in a formal public meeting.

Finally, given the wide implementation of the First Impressions program across states (and countries), there is potential for a more robust research initiative, particularly regarding long-term program impacts at the community level. The NERCRD-funded peer learning group discussed the need for common indicators that can be measured uniformly across programs as a way to assess and compare impacts. This type of coordinated implementation, research, and evaluation effort would provide valuable insights into the benefits, challenges, and transferability of the First Impressions program across communities and states and in different contexts.

Disclaimer and Acknowledgment

Citations of current and past First Impressions programs are based on Internet searches and recommendations from colleagues participating in the national interview research project. We apologize in advance for any exclusion of existing or previously implemented programs that may not have appeared in our search.

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Recommendations for Further Reading

Those wishing to learn more about implementing First Impressions programs may find additional information

using the program links cited herein.

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