

National Review of First Impressions Programs

By Ryan Faulkner and Laura Brown, University of Connecticut Extension

March, 2018

Background:

The First Impressions Community Exchange 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 includes elements of traditional needs assessments (Watkins, Leigh, Platt, & Kaufman, 1998) and asset-based community development strategies (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Often framed within the context of broader community planning, tourism, or placemaking efforts, short term program goals include helping communities identify assets and opportunities; prioritizing areas for community improvement; developing relationships, connections or partnerships with peer communities; and learning basic concepts in community development, placemaking, or tourism.

Over the years many states adopted First Impressions as an Extension program, often making modifications to fit into existing programming. West Virginia's program, for instance, is conducted as a tourism assessment by faculty experts and does not involve a community exchange component. Minnesota's tourism-focused First Impressions involves a community exchange and is integrated into long-term tourism assessment and planning programming. Regardless of the specific focus of the program, part of its general appeal is that it does not require long-term commitments on the part of participants, nor significant financial outputs from participating communities. First Impressions provides an efficient means for engaging community stakeholders and exposing community leaders to new ideas through hands-on and peer learning suitable for adult learners. A list maintained by University of Wisconsin-Extension and University of Connecticut-Extension demonstrates that at least 180 communities in Canada and 323 communities in the United States have used the program since its inception (University of Wisconsin Extension).

A peer learning community funded by a grant from the Northeastern Center for Rural Development (NERCRD) including a number of the states noted above was formed in 2015 to identify research and outreach improvements needed related to the First Impressions program. Given the wide implementation of this program across states (and countries), the team noted that there is significant potential for a more robust research initiative, particularly regarding long-term program impacts at the community level. The 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, states, and in different contexts. This study was designed to start the process of addressing these identified needs. The information collected and lessons learned will be used to inform additional research opportunities and serve as a basis for local improvements to First Impressions programs in many states.

Methods:

This research design took the form of a national program scan with the goal of developing a matrix of program characteristics across First Impressions programs nationally. The first phase of the research involved creating a list of states with active First Impressions programs and program contacts, researching programs based on their online materials, and developing of a set of relevant interview questions (see Appendix A). Phase II involved conducting phone interviews with fourteen program directors from twelve different First Impressions programs to investigate and explore program characteristics. Each interview involved a discussion of 45-90 minutes and over 130 pages of transcribed interviews were analyzed. Phase III involves in depth analysis of the transcribed interviews and development of a peer-reviewed a matrix of program characteristics for evaluating the program's outcomes. The report below is intermediary and unrefined list of observations (following the completion of Phase II) based on a preliminary analysis of transcribed interview data.

General Observations

Network impacts:

- Conducting the phone conversations and inquires in itself created a “network” that seemed to be desired by participants. Everyone expressed interest to share and collaborate around First Impressions, *especially those outside the NRECD grant as there seems to be a disconnect between programs outside that grant partnership.*
- Some programs have not been in direct contact with other First Impressions programs. This research in small ways has created a *diffusion of information* on First Impressions. A shared Google Drive account might be used to permit wider-scale sharing of information on programs to include: history and development of programs, booklets being used, metrics for analysis, photos-videos, exchange models, press releases and just list of contacts for communication.
- *First Impressions seems to have an impact on creating/bolstering new and existing networks across communities, state agencies and individuals within each state.* As an example, states like Kentucky and Minnesota keep spreadsheets of their participants for follow-up and Mississippi has noted significant community impacts. Overall the program seems to improve partnerships between Extension and other organizations, and between participants in the teams. *Some commented that they see doing First Impressions as beneficial good for new county extension operatives to become more familiar with Extension (Illinois).* Others, as in Oregon and especially Mississippi, said that this has led to partnerships with other organizations. This is a pattern across all programs. Simply, First Impressions is a bridge building program that connects people within communities and across communities.

Demonstrating Extension impacts and opportunities for partnership across Extension systems.

- One state mentioned this research is very important and healthy for Extension in terms of demonstrating why a strong vital Extension system is important for each respective state but also for the entire country. This is especially true in times where it seems that the overwhelming majority of funding is going to programs in Agriculture. This program is viewed as a way for Extension to adapt to the 21st century and focus on community and economic development and engage with urban populations and small-medium sized population centers that increasingly make up a bulk of the group.

- There seems to be room for greater collaboration and partnership within this program and with many other areas that Extensions cover. There are already partnerships and collaborations through Regional Extension organizations but probably opportunities for more partnerships, coordination and sharing of information.

Just talking about program created Reflection on their programs by program coordinators.

- Various program coordinators expressed that just the interview helped them to reflect on their own programs and think how they have grown and developed. Very minor, but it seems this type of survey research alone has positive results for the interviewee.

Funding as a challenge: funding of Extension (staffing) and lack of funds for implementation of First Impressions recommendations

- In many cases coordinators expressed that Extensions are underfunded and understaffed. Generally only 1 or two people work with First Impressions, many of whom are already overworked with other projects and commitments. This leaves little time for expanding and innovating the program.
- Another issue that came up significantly was that there are so many great ideas and results that come out of the program but there is no money to implement many of these things afterward. In Kansas, they are tied to a community fund that is giving hundreds of thousands of dollars which may be an interesting funding model over time.
- the funding challenge demonstrates the need for either state grants or federal grants to fund some of the projects and plans that communities identify.
- The problem of understaffing also presents its issue of staff members not having as much time to dig deeper within the reports and forming a more long-term relationship with these communities. The long-term potential of this program is capped without proper funding.

First Impressions as an entryway to other extension and government services

- This seems to create “return customers”, where communities are coming back for more programs and resources.
- Program directors communicated how this program allows them to reach communities they normally wouldn’t have in that it is a great way for communities to engage with extension as well as extension employees to engage with communities.
- Some program coordinators reported communities would go through First Impressions they would seem to engage more with other Extension services. Even if Extension doesn’t have the right programs and resources for other things they can point them in that direction. In this way, the program and Extension be a connector to the community and the services they are looking for. Overall the program seems to create more synergy between community impact driven organizations: within Extension, government agencies and non-profits/ community foundations.
- As previously mentioned, the program director in Ohio mentioned that being a part of First Impressions is a great way for new county extension staff to understand their program areas and communities and get to know the people better. *(The researcher has also observed that think First Impressions is great for new town officials to they can engage with their own community and build relationships with other communities.)*

First Impressions creates opportunities for greater youth involvement

- This takes the form of student led models or engaging youth to participate on a First Impressions team. The representative from Michigan said the *youth are a really an underutilized asset by these communities*. This seems especially relevant where many of these communities have outdated websites and little to no social media presence.
- The representative from Michigan also mentioned how communities could tap into the youth in their communities to help with this. There seems to be a great untapped potential here for youth and high school students to engage in the communities and learn about placemaking/ community and economic development process.
- There is great potential for Extension to further leverage and engage their respective university resources to include: computer science students, marketing, economics, geography, digital design, many of whom may be seeking real world experience. As an example: *economics students could work on projects to analyze something for these communities, computer science to work on their websites, marketing for social media, digital design for photo rendering empty storefronts and create murals on blank walls*.

Issue of older programs not knowing how to progress now that so many visits have been conducted

- Mississippi and others have expressed difficulties with measuring impact and going back to communities: how quickly can you go back in and do another visit? In some communities they town leadership changes quickly so they might not even know they did First Impressions, making it worthwhile for them to take part in the program again.
- *This leads to the question: how do we make First Impressions a continuous program? More "mature" First Impressions programs need to have a different scope than new programs. This could include long term planning at the programmatic level (stepping beyond what happens next for the communities).*

Challenge of measuring First Impressions impacts

- Universally everyone expressed the problem of *how do we measure Extensions impacts with First Impressions*. Very few programs are keeping a discrete list of First Impressions impacts and results. Many expressed that "we should" or we need to do a better job.
- Reasons for not keeping track are universal too, with the primary constraints being time, resources and just the challenge of keeping track. Some expressed difficulty with the "but for" problem of determining if impacts occurred because of First Impressions or not and that some impacts are difficult to "quantify."
- Overall there is a need for the quantification of this program and tracking its results and impacts overtime. Some communities like Minnesota and Illinois are doing work on this and others are using pre-and post-surveys. There seems to be plenty of anecdotal evidence of First Impressions successes but most expressed a need for a way to better document its impacts. Something like *Ripple Effect Mapping as they do in Ohio to track First Impressions could be a tool. As well as using Qualtrics to store responses overtime*. Having a staff member follow up and document First Impressions is being used in Kentucky.
- *With time and effort placed into tracking these effects, greater sources of funding might be leveraged whether through Federal, state or community grants. By detailing First Impressions success, failures and impacts overtime we can also understand the program greater on a micro and macro level.*

As a tool for identifying similar challenges across communities

- One issue that seems prevalent across many states is many *communities lack an updated presence online*. Many have outdated websites and don't have the social media push. Some program directors mentioned how some communities just need to have their website updated. It seems that in many cases these towns aren't using the internet effectively.
- At the same time program directors stated it's important to understand where communities are coming from and who makes up those communities. Not everyone uses the internet or gets most of the information from there, especially in more rural areas with less Wi-Fi and Cell service.)
- As the millennial generation ages, engagement and collaboration is increasingly through the internet. A community's website and social media are becoming in their own way a "community entrance", just like a "physical town welcome sign" ought to be upkeep and made attractive, its becoming just if not more important for a communities "online entrance" to have the same attention.
- Some program directors stated that running First Impressions across their states allowed them to see the trends of what is happening in their communities and the types of services, resources and programs that they need. As an example, in Mississippi representatives say First Impressions was instrumental in developing programs and *"shaped a lot of the work that we do today."* First Impressions can help Extension and their regions and states understand their communities. *(There are many more similar problems and more research could be done on this)*

Identifying Challenges and Opportunities Across Programs

Challenges of matching and scale

- *Multiple program coordinators stress issue of scale in the project*. That is, it is hard to assess and evaluate a large community, (larger than 100,000). Many expressed interest expressed in developing a model for larger urban areas. Kentucky is doing this in some neighborhoods of larger metro areas.
- This presents the related logistical issue for larger geographic states to gather everyone in physical location for training and other meetings.
- There were very similar challenges and success of programs. The biggest challenge seems to be matching exchange communities including identifying similar demographic makeup, close enough in geographic location and other factors.
- An additional challenge is managing successful exchanges and taking plans into action: the "following through" problem. (Have to go through again and list the major success and challenges)

Challenge of making communities accountable

- Interviewees noted that the results aren't as effective if they feel they don't have skin in the game. This involves coordination of follow up meetings, some kind of monetary buy in, funds to implement projects and general excitement to make things more effective.

Big community forums aren't as effective

- As the representative from Illinois and others mentioned it's not as effective to have a huge community meeting in that this did not produce actionable outcomes. Program directors have

found that its best to have the results first given to a governing body or others with influence and authority to make decisions that can impact their community. While others have had more success with this (need references here), Kentucky and Mississippi, for example, logistics of setting up a community forum can be difficult.

Greater opportunity for integrating technology

- Some program representatives identified opportunities to implement and use technology (beyond communities updating their websites and engaging social media) but to include things like using the ARC Collector App as a supplement for the booklets. This allows comments to be physically mapped out and saved to the cloud. There also is an opportunity to use a program like Qualtrics to upload the information from the questions so programs can have a library of the data overtime.
- *Technology also presents the opportunity to ask 5-10 similar questions across all First Impressions programs and see what the results would be overtime. We would find very similar trends in our communities and could develop similar approaches to deal with them. Important information to collect overtime on a federal, regional and state level.*
- Photos also present an opportunity for better incorporation into the program. Photo rendering is something that Mississippi does which includes taking blank walls on a building and showing what it could look like or taking a vacant lot and making a public park, or a rundown building and showing what it could look like if renovated. They did this and on building even got a state grant and is now a historical building. Another community used and got a grant to make a public park. This is a simple tool and something that Extensions could do or leverage their respective universities to have graphic design students work on for part of their class projects.

First Impressions as a great way for communities to get lots of pictures and videos for marketing

- By the nature of First Impressions being such a “tourist” program, there are many pictures that are gathered for communities that they can then use for marketing or whatever their purposes.
- As an example, one community in Mississippi that went through First Impressions was hit badly by Hurricane Katrina, and the photos from the exchange were used to show the community what they looked like before. The exchange takes a “snapshot” in its time for the community. This has implications for a community historical but may be something that will be increasingly important for communities on costal areas with climate change and rising sea levels.

Identified reasons for success

- Every Program coordinator mentioned in one way or another *that the simplicity of this program is what makes it so successful.* It is extremely easy to explain to people, implement and administer. This simplicity is what makes this program so adaptable and versatile across states and to fit their needs and wants, regardless of geography, demographics and economics. Even the simple results and effects of this program, like painting a mural on a blank side of a building, or adding some new lights or decorations allows communities to target and reach the “low hanging fruit.”
- First impressions is multi-dimensional in that it can be used for strictly a community exchange, place making, community development, economic development, tourism etc. Some examples include First Impressions In Schools (Mississippi) , First Impressions in Neighborhoods of

Cities(Kentucky) and the Student Led Model in New Hampshire. Many opportunities to coordinate amongst state agencies as well as small and large-scale organizations

Future research ideas

Volunteers and network development

- It may be interesting to do more research on volunteer networks and volunteer work. Really spurs that idea of active citizenship and empowers average person to effect change in their community. It seems to connect the right people together in communities. This program seems to strengthen communities' bonds and the use of volunteer networks serves as a foundation of active citizenship. Active citizenship is the core of what America founded on. In a Democracy we rely on an active and engaged citizenry. This program seems to promote that idea, by bringing in paid and elected officials in the town with others who care about their community. Bringing this information to the public and striving to work together with other organizations. This brings a greater sense of agency to these people and communities. This idea and principle is more important now more than ever. Facilitating the growth of strong volunteer networks is cultivating the growth of active citizenship, which ultimately strengthens American Democracy.

Impacts of fun, play, and exploration

- In my own experience and hearing from others First Impressions is fun. Everyone likes going to another place they haven't been. They get to explore somewhere new and who doesn't like to eat good food and venture to a new place? The exchange community seems to have a lot of fun together and grow closer as a group through the process. We might explore long-term effects of even this has on community.

Innovating other uses of this program

- The program may have additional applications in tourism nationally and within states scale in any situation that involves helping communities understand their assets and liabilities.
- Adaptations of the program might help address prejudice and equity issues and breakdown stereotypes. This can be great for people to actually see these places and their opinions can be based on what they actually see and experience not what someone tells them or they see in the news.
- There may also be opportunities to engage different parts of communities or cities that don't traditionally work with each other to help break down prejudice and create bridges within communities: to create great communication and coordination across socioeconomic backgrounds.

Conclusion

Overall, we found the research to be a great success. We gathered much information on the First Impressions Programs across the country. In total it ended up being over 130+ pages of transcriptions. There is significant anecdotal evidence of how this program has transformed communities. As well as documentation of the different adaptations and successes and challenges of this program.

First Impressions National Review Interview Research Questions

- Does the program utilize a community exchange or expert based model?
- What is the programmatic area that this program is intended to address (tourism, placemaking, community development etc)
- Is this program standalone or integrated into a larger program? If it is part of a larger program what is the scope of the program?
- Is the program statewide or supported at the state level?
- What are the expected outcomes of the program statewide and at the community level?
- How are program outcomes measured statewide?
- How are community level program outcomes measured?
- What is the cost to the community for participation?
- How many people participate in the team?
- Who are the participants on the team generally?
- How are team members recruited?
- What is the overall timeline for a visit from start to finish?
- What tools are used by participants to collect data during the visit?
- How are photos used in the visit? How? What tools are used to collect, share, or communicate photo images?
- Are maps used in the program? How? What tools are used to share or use information from maps?
- What is expected of the communities after the visit?
- What role does walking play in the visit?
- How did this program develop in this state?