

Turning the Tide on Poverty: Measuring and Predicting Civic Engagement Success

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Introduction

Turning the Tide on Poverty launched over two and a half years ago in eight sites within five Southeast states: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. Significant strides have taken place in learning about how best to build civic capacity, particularly in severely poverty-stricken communities. With each of the pilot counties struggling with a 20% or greater poverty rate, much was at stake in both fostering civic engagement as well as in finding viable strategies to help address the wicked issue at hand. Cooperative Extension Service (CES) worked hand-in-hand with the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) to both design and implement the Tide initiative. CES agents, serving as community coaches, assembled community based teams made up of local citizens to help organize and plan for the work ahead. The process involved five weeks of dialogue using a study circles model and guide designed specifically for this initiative, followed by a community wide Action Forum during which study circles participants shared potential action ideas. The Forum participants then worked through a consensus process to identify the top action ideas on which they wanted to focus. Action Teams were formed around these ideas and the real work of Tide began.

During December of 2010, seven new Tide teams completed the SRDC led train-the-trainer workshop with plans of launching Tide in 2011: Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. Of these, Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia kicked off Tide in the early months of 2011. The remaining four states encountered a series of challenges that delayed or stalled their work. Arkansas has recently worked past their challenges and is, at this writing, helping to organize the resulting Action Teams that have formed. Likewise, Kentucky and West Virginia have made recent strides with plans to launch later this spring. Tennessee, challenged by considerable staff layoffs within CES, has yet to firm starting plans, but continues to make progress in gaining internal support for the Tide initiative.

Data Sources and Methodology

Working with a team of researchers throughout the nation, the SRDC designed a three-pronged approach to gathering data relative to the work of Tide. First, 8-10 key informants within each of the eight initial pilot sites along with a focus group of citizens within each state were interviewed with a spotlight on how the community tended to manage decision-making and problem solving. Questions revolved around decision-making structures, efforts to involve citizens, and the role of CES within this context. During the late spring and early summer months of 2011, researchers returned to those initial sites to visit with these same individuals in an effort to understand changes that may have occurred because of Tide.

The second source of data came from the study circles participants themselves. During the community kick-off event, attendees completed a pre-survey to explore their current beliefs and actions related to civic involvement. At the close of the process (during the Action Forum), 6-8 weeks later, a post survey was administered. One question on the post-survey asked how many sessions the participant had joined. By dividing the respondents into a “high participant group” (attending four or five study circle sessions) and “low participant group” (attending three or less sessions) also served to provide insights into what individual characteristics might hinder or foster civic involvement.

A third important information source came from within CES itself. Looking to how CES responded and adapted to what may have been for some a new role of capacity building versus education was an important consideration. Thus researchers interviewed CES leaders through two focus group settings, one at the initiation of the pilot project (August 2009) followed by a repeat session at the one-year mark (August 2010). Likewise, CES agents that served in these pilot sites as the conveners and organizers of Tide were surveyed along these same timelines.

Year Two sites are following a similar protocol. Two changes have been made, though. First, the focus group with CES leaders was eliminated. This was mainly due to the timing of the second year project. Because the planning and preparation fell within a short window, December 2010 – early 2011, time did not allow for the pre-launch focus groups to take place. A strengthening change, though, is in the administration of the participant surveys. As noted earlier, the Tide One pre/post surveys were only about 6-8 weeks apart. This did not allow adequate time to measure long-term changes in the participant responses. So, during Year Two, the sites are planning a one year celebration to showcase success to date, but to also provide an opportunity to administer the post survey to participants. Around this same time (late spring 2012), these sites will be completing a post-Tide round of key informant interviews and focus groups as was done in Year One sites. The SRDC is looking forward to having this additional data to use in strengthening the knowledge base of how civic engagement works in rural, impoverished communities.

For the purposes of this report, most of the data come from Year One sites since that represents a complete set of information. Where Year Two data do enter the analysis is in the full set of pre/post surveys from CES agents in both years. Where this Year Two input is included is noted within the respective sections below.

Defining Success

Success in civic engagement can be assessed in a number of ways. Traditional measures of numbers and diversity of individuals participating are valid markers of success since the goal of civic engagement is to get more people from varied backgrounds and experiences involved in local decision-making and action on important issues. Likewise, noting what percent of these individuals are joining the community process for the first time could be a key dimension to consider in measuring success. Stepping up and doing more than simply participating in dialogue is another metric that can be used to gauge success, namely, the number of community actions that have been selected, initiated and completed. These measures help assess actual movement toward community improvement as citizens become more involved.

Related to the action focused measures is also a question as to whether or not the actions taken are sustainable. Are completed actions seen as trophies to set on the community “fireplace” and admire, or are they seen as “stepping stones” to tackling the next series of challenges to be addressed? This dynamic between viewing actions as “finished products” vs. “on-going steps to success” is vital to establishing civic engagement processes as a community norm. Relating this directly to the Turning the Tide on Poverty initiative, a community could have gone through the motions of Tide and completed one or more action steps, which in and of itself would be a valuable outcome. However, if civic engagement stopped at the end of the “program,” the community would not have gained as much as a community that saw Tide as an opportunity to weave the practice of engagement into the very fabric of the community’s civic life.

With these avenues for measuring success in mind, the research team turned its attention to examining the eight pilot sites to gauge the progress made within each. The five states joining this initiative in the first year were Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi each chose two sites while Georgia and Oklahoma selected one location within their states. Each pilot site was selected from a pool of micropolitan or non-core counties/parishes having an individual poverty rate of 20% or higher. Within the selected counties and parishes, the Extension agents leading the initiative worked with a core team of community members to determine the geographic scope. Some teams opted to launch the Tide initiative county-wide, while others focused on one or more communities within the county. Alabama zeroed in on single communities within their selected sites: Selmont in Dallas County and Uniontown in Perry County. Louisiana followed suit in selecting the towns of Washington in St. Landry Parish and St. Joseph in Tensas Parish. Georgia selected an even smaller geography within Elbert County, a sub-community within the town of

Elberton. County-wide efforts were conducted in Neshoba and Lauderdale Counties (Mississippi) and Okfuskee County in Oklahoma. Within Neshoba County lie the communities of Philadelphia (the county seat), Union and Pearl River (a Choctaw Tribal Community). Lauderdale’s county seat, Meridian, which was the largest city in the pilot initiative, was joined with a smaller neighboring community, Collinsville. In Okfuskee County, Oklahoma, the focus was on Okemah (county seat) as well as three smaller communities: Boley, Clearview, and Weleetka.

Participation:

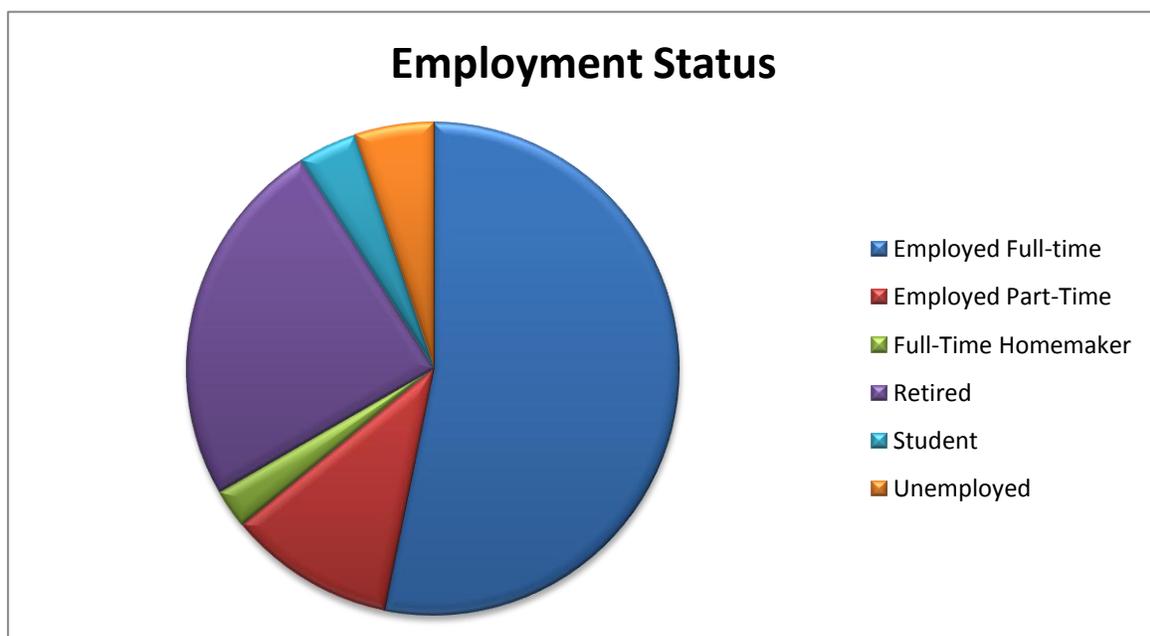
The most obvious question in measuring the success of a civic engagement process is “How many people were involved?” The chart below provides a quick view of the number of people engaged in the initiative in each site, including the number of volunteer facilitators trained and the number of circles into which participants were organized. One quick note here is that the site in Elberton (GA) was not able to launch its study circles, a situation that will be discussed further into this report.

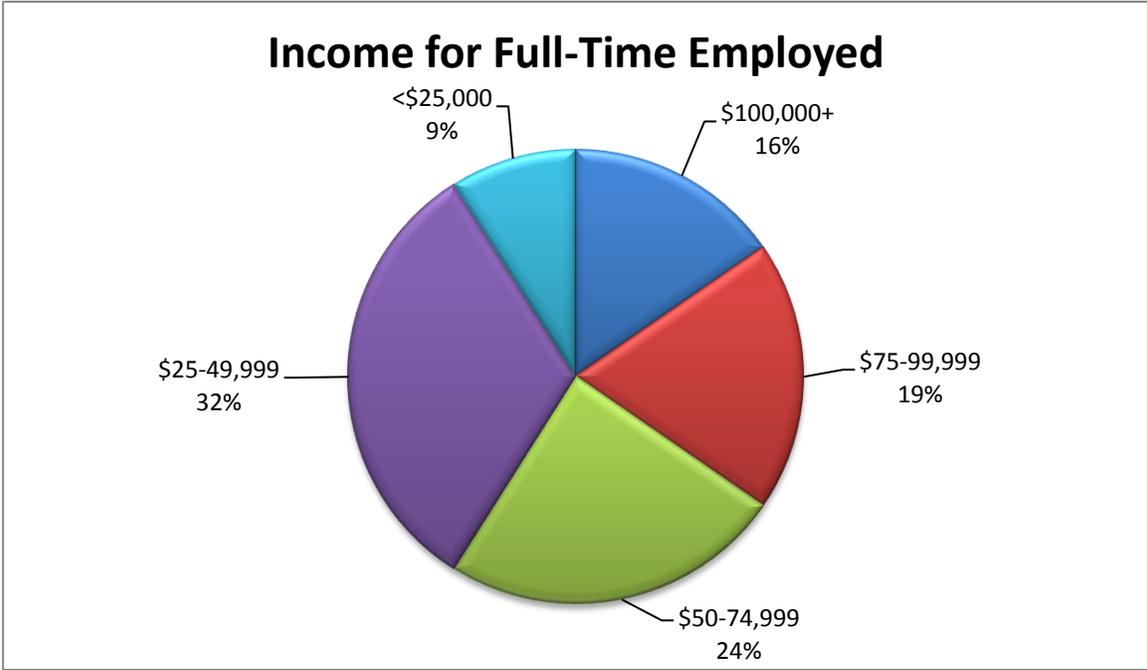
Year One Pilot Site	2009 Population	Facilitators	Study Circles	Participants
Dallas Co. (AL) Selmont	42,748 3,498	4	2	19
Perry Co. (AL) Uniontown	10,689 1,521	3	2	24
Elbert Co. (GA) Elberton	20,574 4650	6	0	0
St. Landry Parish (LA) Washington	90,983 1,045	9	2	15
Tensas Parish (LA) St. Joseph	5,798 1,057	8	1	12
Lauderdale Co. (MS) Meridian Collinsville	77,966 39,695 1,820	16	4	50
Neshoba Co. (MS) Philadelphia Pearl River Union	29,949 7,902 3,283 2,147	40	11	90
Okfuskee Co. (OK) Okemah Boley Clearview Weleetka	11,134 2,823 1,090 50 904	10	4	40

Diversity:

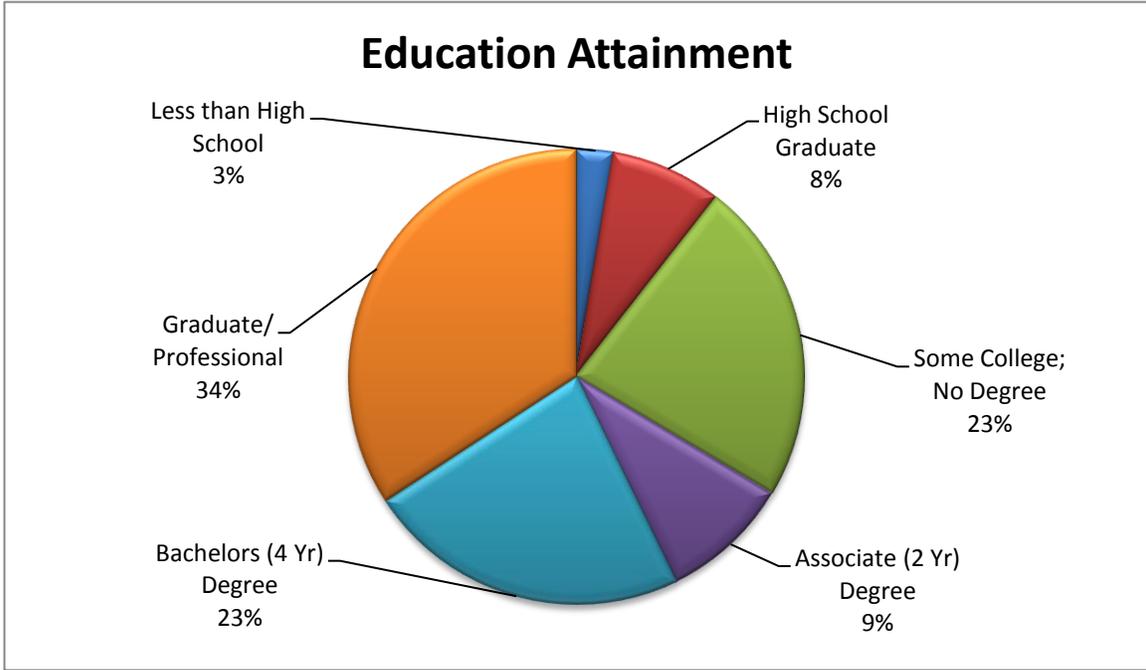
The clearest demonstration of diversity within the Tide initiative was documented in the community surveys completed by individuals who attended the kick-off events that launched the Tide program (N=163). Each of the seven pilot sites that launched Tide was successful in involving both men and women with a wide age span (ages 24-66), although female involvement was more than double that of men (108 females; 45 males). (Note: Some sites also involved youth, however, the survey was not distributed to minors). The number of years individuals had lived in the respective communities was also well distributed with some “newcomers” of less than 10 years to a number of community “sages” with 60+ years of community life.

Over half of the respondents lived outside of the city limits, traveling as far as 50 miles to attend the event (78 out of city limits; 68 in city limits). About two-thirds of those residing outside of the city lived within 10 miles. Most of the respondents (85%) reported working and living in the same county. Given that many people in these rural areas traveled to nearby larger cities to work, this percentage of in-county workers is likely higher than the community average. It may be, however, that those that travel greater distances to and from work had less time to attend the community sessions. Only about one quarter of the respondents owned businesses of their own, though most were employed fulltime. As can be seen in the following income chart, full-time employment in these distressed counties did not guarantee a high paycheck. In fact, in the two Alabama counties, none of the participants reported a salary above \$49,999. Calculating income with family size puts four of the full-time workers’ families clearly below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level and places all but four making less than \$49,999 in the realm of 200% of the poverty level. So, even among the respondents working full-time, better than 40% of these individuals were part of the working poor.





Because education attainment is often linked to poverty, the graph of income might be expected to closely mirror education attainment. However, this was not the case as a large percentage of participants reported much higher levels of education attainment than the salaries above would suggest.



Racial diversity is the final demographic feature to be explored in this section of the report. For seven of the eight sites (with Okfuskee County, OK, being the exception), African Americans are the largest minority racial group. However, in some pilot sites, African Americans represented a larger share of the population than Caucasians. Two of the sites, Neshoba County, MS, and Okfuskee County, OK, are located in proximity to Native American reservations. Participation rates among African Americans and Caucasians was near equal, which was encouraging given the racial demographics across the span of the sites (43% African American, 52% Caucasian.) What was disappointingly though was the fact that only three Native Americans completed the surveys. While the pilot sites reported greater participation from this group in the actual circles, having their voices better represented in the survey data would have been a plus. Another disappointment is that the two Alabama communities involved in the Tide program only had completed surveys from African American participants. In at least one of the sites, all of the study circle participants were African American. These disparities are of concern given that it does not spur the growth of broad-based civic engagement.

Sustainable Action:

Individual Volunteerism and Empowerment: The extent to which individuals become involved in the community process, feel empowered to contribute, and continue to take an active role in community improvement efforts, can be seen as relevant measures of success of this initiative. We employed a variety of indicators to help document Tide's effectiveness. Our first was to determine the breath of participants' involvement in the Tide study circle meetings. We discovered that four out of five (81%) of the people that participated in at least four of the five discussion sessions followed up by joining an action team. This was more than double the percentage (39.1%) that volunteered after participating in three or less sessions. Thus, for this initiative, increased participation in the study circles proved to positively correlated with volunteering for action.

Additionally, 15% of all the volunteers indicated that this was their first time taking action in the community. Perhaps the discussions themselves helped people connect with the issue and see a place where they could help find solutions to local problems. One reason may be the confidence that participants developed during the study circles process. When asked directly, "Do you feel more confident to address issues in your community as a result of Tide," 87% said "yes." Similarly, 97% of participants stated they would recommend the study circles process to other communities.

When asked how their view of their community changed throughout the Tide process, respondents who that attended at least four of the five discussion sessions reported a number of changes in their own perspectives of their community. They highlighted the following important changes in their own knowledge, attitudes, and behavior:

- Became more aware of community strengths, resources, and needs
- Gained a better understanding of people's perception and perspectives
- Became encouraged by seeing others participate
- Felt more personally committed to doing more in my community

Taken as a whole, these individual changes in confidence, community perspectives, and volunteerism seem to indicate that the process of study circles may at least have succeeded in planting the seeds of sustained civic engagement in some of the Tide communities.

A second demonstration of the emergence of sustainable community action can be derived from the success of the community initiatives themselves. That is, were community projects launched and completed, are there on-going activities (as opposed to one-time actions), and are structures in place to help sustain the work begun as part of Tide? To help answer these questions, the SRDC research team revisited, by phone or in person, with each of the key leaders in the pilot sites during the summer of 2011. During these visits, the team gathered detailed information on the (1) number of community projects that had been initiated as a result of the Tide discussions, (2) number of projects completed to date, (3) number of projects still in process, and (4) likelihood of long-term sustainability of one or more of the initiatives begun.

The first and second indicators were fairly easy to track, while the latter two items took a bit more work to document. The third measure, for instance, number of projects still in process, is a moving target in some communities. As one Extension agent stated, “I am constantly hearing about another project that someone has started as a spinoff of the Tide initiative in this community.” It seems that as citizens got the vision for what they could accomplish, whether on their own or in a small group, a number of truly grassroots projects sprouted up spontaneously throughout some communities. So, the number of current projects in process in a given community may be underreported, particularly in the more engaged communities.

Within each community, the research team looked for evidence that one or more of the initiatives begun from the Tide discussions had garnered enough community support to be sustained over time. This support took many different forms. For example, in Neshoba County, the local food banks have established a formal contract with the Mississippi Food Network to get food at a free or reduced rate. As such, this partnership is likely to sustain this important work in the county. In Washington, LA, sustainability has come in the form of a formal city proclamation of support for the development of a locally owned and operated community nursery and garden. Moreover, the donation of space and application for a 501(3)c status to help guide the community initiative suggest that this important effort will continue for an extended period of time.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are two communities that never successfully launched their circles and three others that only selected one short term action item on which to work. While each of these three completed their one selected action item, there is no evidence that community involvement by these individuals has persisted. The research team decided to divide the Tide communities into three subgroups: “high” -- indicating strong evidence of sustainability, “middle” -- indicating some evidence or movement toward sustainability, and “low” – reflecting no identifiable evidence of

sustainability. These categories, along with the other metrics described in this section, are presented in the table below. Note that while eight pilot counties joined the initial Tide project, some counties expanded across multiple communities (shown indented under the respective counties). Where possible, throughout this discussion, indicators on both the county and community levels are displayed.

Site	# Projects	# Complete	# In Process	Sustainable
Selmont, Dallas County, AL	5	2	3	High
Uniontown, Perry County, AL	1	1	0	Low
Elbert County, GA	0	0	0	Low
Washington, St. Landry Parish, LA	4	0	4	High
St. Joseph, Tensas Parish, LA	7	7	0	Mid
Lauderdale County, MS	4	3	1	Mid
Collinsville	1	1	0	Low
Meridian	3	2	1	High
Neshoba County, MS	7	7	4	High
Philadelphia	4	4	2+	High
Pearl River	1	1	0	Low
Union	2	2	2	High
Okfuskee County, OK	22	20	2	Mid
Boley	8	8	?	High
Clearview	11	9	2	High
Okemah	0	0	0	Low
Weleetka	3	3	?	Mid

Examining the Context for Dialogue

As noted above, considerable time was invested during the summer of 2011 in exploring the variety of community changes that took place as a result of Turning the Tide on Poverty. One aspect of our investigation involved revisiting the set of key informants and focus group participants in the pilot communities with whom we visited at the beginning stages of the Tide program. Just before Tide was launched in 2009, 8-10 key informants and a separate focus group with a similar number of participants representing the general citizenry were identified in each community. These individuals were interviewed to help paint a picture of the civic life characteristics of these places. By returning to interview these same individuals, it was possible for the researchers to inquire about any changes that may have taken place in the civic vitality of their communities.

As the team analyzed the resulting discussions, four key themes emerged that seemed to have some possible bearing on the success of the Tide initiative in each community. These themes were consistently mentioned across each site, though the topic may have been couched in either a positive or negative light. For instance, race relations was a consistent topic raised in each location, but communities differed in whether local relationships among the various racial and ethnic groups were deemed as positive or negative changes. The other three consistent themes were citizens' perceptions of the openness of local leadership, perceptions of the community climate in general, and the presence of a local champion to give leadership to the initiative. We now turn to a more detailed discussion of these items in the sections that follow.

Exploring Themes:

Perceptions of Leadership: With a high level of consistency, citizens in all pilot communities reported that the majority of community decisions were made by elected officials in more of a "top-down" leadership style. That perception did not change between pre- and post-surveys or interviews. However, a clear distinction was made between communities where citizens viewed local leaders as open to community input or those that were closed to such involvement. For instance, some communities described local leaders as "corrupt," "self-serving," "dysfunctional," and "tyrannical." In contrast, other communities saw their leaders as "progressive," "open," "responsive," and "respected." With the exception of one community, the direction (positive or negative) did not change in any demonstrable way between the pre- and post-interviews. The one exception -- Meridian, Mississippi -- seemed to reflect more positive feelings toward the newly elected mayor (post) than the previous (pre) mayor. Also, with the exception of Washington, Louisiana, citizens' perceptions of leaders seemed very consistent within each community. Simply, the voices in each community were either all positive toward their respective leaders or were all negative. Washington was the only community where the voices were mixed in their comments toward elected officials.

Community Climate: The community climate theme seeks to describe how citizens viewed their community in more general terms, in either positive or negative expressions. While all counties, by design of the project, were experiencing individual poverty rates of 20% or more, how citizens viewed the local atmosphere differed. Some, for example, described the community as experiencing feelings of hopelessness, despair, and apathy. Others, in contrast, viewed their communities as optimistic, having a “can do” attitude, and ready to do something positive to turn the situation around. Four communities were viewed consistently by respondents as being places of hopelessness, while three were consistently viewed as positive, hopeful places. In between, though, were three locations where the citizens had mixed perceptions about the community climate.

Race Relations: As noted above, comments about race relations surfaced in every community. But, no questions were posed to the people we interviewed or those taking part in the focus group meetings that focused specifically on the issue of race. Yet, respondents saw this as a noteworthy part of the discussion of civic engagement. For the most part, citizens discussed racial tensions between Caucasians and African Americans. However, in two Tide communities with Native American reservations located nearby, the issue of strained race relations between these and Caucasians was noted. While no community members interviewed claimed that race relations were “good,” some did state that race relations were improving while others felt it was either getting worse or stuck in the past. Lauderdale County and the Town of Philadelphia (both in Mississippi), for example, experienced positive movement on race relations. Philadelphia’s neighboring town of Pearl River, however, did not appear to follow suit (though input from this community was limited.) Neighboring Alabama counties, Dallas and Perry, appeared to struggle with poor race relations, along with Tensas Parish, Louisiana. Mixed responses on race relations came from St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, and Okfuskee County, Oklahoma.

Local Champion: The idea behind a local champion is that in some communities, a clear leader emerged that demonstrated enthusiasm for the Tide process, encouraged others to become involved, and/or embraced a particular action idea. In some instances, these were Extension employees and in other cases, community members. Some of the local champion voices stated such things as, “We should be doing this (study circles) all the time.” “We need this (Tide process.)” and “I will – no matter what.” In places that seemed to lack a local champion influence, messages like “It won’t work her,” “Been there, done that,” “No one will come,” and “No one cares” were frequently voiced.

Again, looking to a way to analyze the qualitative responses that were gathered, the research team first identified communities that clearly pointed to one or more individuals serving as champions for either the Tide process or for an Action Idea. Champions were then separated into two groups: Extension Champions or Community (non-Extension) Champions. Within Extension, all of the sites except one (Elbert County, GA) had an Extension person that was recognized as at least a moderately engaged champion of the Tide process. In two particular counties (Neshoba County, MS and St.

Landry Parish, LA), specific Extension staff were mentioned as very influential leaders in promoting the Tide process and in encouraging civic involvement. In Elbert County, the main deterrent reported to launching Tide was the absence of a local Extension Champion. In that particular community, one Extension agent initially voiced strong interest in spearheading Tide in the community. However, because of some other demands beyond this person's control, the agent was unable to devote any time to Tide. That left this community without anyone to help spark a vision for what Tide could do in the community. Community Champions emerged in eight separate communities. For the most part, though, they were noted for their work in an Action Team, the activity that followed the dialogue process.

Putting the Pieces Together

As the research team examined each of these themes, they began to classify Tide sites into high and low groups on each of these themes. Next, they generated a matrix to help detect any possible patterns. A label of "high" was provided for Tide sites that indicated positive views on a given theme. "Low" indicates a negative slant to the related comments while "mid" was assigned to communities where messages were a mix of positive and negative around the theme without a clear direction. A careful review of the resulting chart suggests that a near one-to-one correlation was found between "sustainable" and "community champion" (with the exception of Weleetka, Oklahoma). Furthermore, with the exception of Selmont, Alabama, all communities rating "High" in terms of sustainability did not get labeled as "low" in any other column. Also of interest is the fact that Philadelphia, Mississippi, emerged as the pilot site "front runner" on a number of measures, such as total numbers of facilitators trained, circle participants, and Action Forum attendees. Likewise, the depth of actions pursued and the attention devoted to sustainability by the Philadelphia Action Teams has placed them at the top of the success ladder. So, it is interesting to note that on each of these factors that may have some influence on the success of Tide, Philadelphia ranked "high" on all. This would be an arena that warrants additional attention and examination.

Site	Sustainable	Perception of Leadership	Race Relations	Community Climate	Extension Champion	Community Champion
Selmont, Dallas County, AL	High	Low	Low	Low	Mid	High
Uniontown, Perry County, AL	Low	Low	Low	Low	Mid	Low
Elbert County, GA	Low				Low	Low
Washington, St. Landry Parish, LA	High	Mid	Mid	Mid	High	High
St. Joseph, Tensas Parish, LA	Mid	Low	Low	Low	Mid	Mid
Lauderdale County, MS	Mid	Low (pre) /High (post)	High	Mid	Mid	Mid
Collinsville	Low					Low
Meridian	High	Low (pre) High (post)				High
Neshoba County, MS	High	High	High	High	High	High
Philadelphia	High	High	High	High	High	High
Pearl River	Low	Low*	Low		Mid	Low
Union	High				High	High
Okfuskee County, OK	Mid	High	Mid	Mid	Mid	Mid
Boley	High	High		High	Mid	High
Clearview	High	High		High	Mid	High
Okemah	Low	High		Low	Mid	Low
Weleetka	Mid	High		Mid	Mid	High

* The research team received very limited input from this community.

Individual Characteristics Relating to Civic Involvement

In addition to exploring community characteristics that may influence civic engagement, individual characteristics also play a role. To examine this component further, a measure of civic engagement was derived from three survey questions:

- In general, how would you describe your level of involvement in community activities (Likert Scale, 1-5 with 1=not active, 5=very active)
- How many local groups or organizations have you been a member of over the past three years? (open-ended response)
- On average, how many hours a month do you spend in organized activities with other members of your community? (open-ended response)

Given that the responses to each of these questions were given a numerical value (with a higher value meaning a higher level of community involvement on the three measures of interest), the strength of civic engagement was determined by simply summing each respondent's answers to the three questions. Once this gauge of civic involvement was calculated, responses were compared to a range of other questions to determine if any consistent correlations could be uncovered. Several characteristics were found to be significantly correlated.

Ties to the Community:

Several pointers toward civic engagement relate to ties that individuals have to the community. For instance, people that reported higher levels of civic engagement also reported:

- Higher frequency of interactions with friends and neighbors
- Greater familiarity with Extension programming
- More frequent access of sources of information from newspapers, local presentations, and government officials

Additionally, those with higher civic involvement scores also were more likely to report that their communities had leadership training programs, hosted annual community events, and had local organizations that worked together. Thus, it may be that people with greater community ties living in communities that frequently promote community/partnership events are more aware of opportunities for involvement.

Individual Attitudes and Beliefs:

In addition to community ties, individual attitudes and beliefs seem to connect to civic engagement. Positive correlations exist between high civic engagement and high levels of agreement with these statements:

- People in our community trust each other.
- I know people to ask for help if needed.
- It is important for me to feel a part of the community.
- Our community cannot solve problems without outside help.

The first three bullets are consistent with literature regarding the importance of trust and creating a sense of attachment to their community as important contributors to citizen involvement. The last of these appears, on the surface, to be a bit puzzling. One possible explanation has to do with the context of these pilot sites. As noted earlier, all sites had 20% or greater poverty, many of which have been “stuck” in persistent poverty for generations. Several of these communities noted that they had become accustomed to outside organizations coming in to provide programs and services to assist local residents. In fact, this history became a significant barrier in launching Tide in some communities as many residents found it difficult to grasp that this project was the sole responsibility of local residents, not the work of an outside entity. As such, it is possible that some community members were cognizant of the history of dependence on the outside world for success, but were willing to join hands locally to help bring about important changes.

In reality, co-creating a new future for these communities, one of combining local engagement with appropriate outside resources can be a positive stance. While building strong ties internally is vital to a community, so too is the need to build ties with external organizations and agencies that can provide resources to help communities achieve their locally determined priorities.

Finally, one negatively correlated statement reflects the feelings of hopelessness that were present in some communities. The greater the agreement with the statement, “People like me have little impact,” the less a person was likely to be involved, or the lower their civic engagement score. This, too, makes sense as people who feel discouraged are far less likely to put forth the effort needed to bring about meaningful change in their communities.

Demographics and Civic Engagement:

As noted at the beginning of this report, demographics within the survey respondents were reflective of the communities in most places. So, examining civic engagement by the demographic attributes of participants was an important feature of our study. However, only two factors had at best a very modest correlation with civic engagement. Higher levels of education and being married were both barely significant in relation to civic engagement scores. No other demographic characteristic was significant. This is encouraging as it may indicate that the importance of involvement in community is not limited to a particular population sector.

Cooperative Extension Service

The final section of this report focuses specifically on the role that Cooperative Extension Service (CES) played in the Turning the Tide on Poverty effort, and how the CES professionals reacted to their place in the process. The overarching question is, “How does promoting civic engagement in communities alter the way in which CES works?” Within this exploration, a number of topics were examined. In particular, consideration was given to CES’ perspectives on:

- Civic engagement as an outreach tool
- New partnerships resulting from civic engagement
- New and different opportunities resulting from civic engagement
- Benefits and value of involving citizens
- Perception of citizens’ roles in resolving difficult community issues
- Shifts from the “expert” to “co-learner” perspectives and how CES is responding
- Strengthening CES’ commitment to the process of civic engagement
- Perspectives of CES agents’ use of the process for controversial issues

Information guiding this section was secured from two main sources. First, as the Turning the Tide on Poverty initiative launched in late summer 2009, Extension Directors, Administrators, and Program Leaders (referred to as “Leadership” from here forth) from the pilot states were invited to participate in a focus group discussion to explore their initial thoughts about CES’ role in civic engagement activities. One year later, as the initial cycle of Tide was ending and resulting Action Teams were getting traction, these leaders were reconvened for a follow-up discussion.

In addition to the voices of the CES leadership, researchers wanted to gauge changes in attitudes and beliefs of the on-the-ground Extension agents (referred to as “agents” from here forth) charged with the direct work of launching the initiative. Following a similar timeline as the focus groups, an online survey was sent to the Extension agents that were working directly in the pilot sites. These agents, some with county, regional, and state responsibilities, completed the survey at the launching of the initiative as well as at the close of the project cycle. Within the past month, the pre/post survey cycle has also been completed with the Year Two Extension agents, providing two years of input from those closest to the work.

Civic Engagement as Outreach

Several individuals, both among leadership and agents, observed the expanded pool of people that CES was able to reach through the Tide initiative. Some of these observations surfaced as part of discussions about new partnerships and new opportunities that have emerged. But some comments seemed to reflect the potential for CES to achieve a broader reach to citizens by employing this type of civic engagement avenue. One of the leaders living in one of the pilot communities purposefully chose not to connect Tide to his professional role so that he could hear about the initiative as a community member rather than what might occur in his more

formal role. He observed, “I heard a lot of positive feedback from the program without the community knowing I was a part of it. The community saw it as a fresh approach, which was well accepted. Locals got to be a part of the process.”

Another leader commented, “Most groups we work with are homogenous. These aren’t. They are diverse in race, income, all that.” Similarly, another leader stated, “[Tide] takes us outside of the groups we usually work with. That’s a good thing. We have groups we like to work with and call on, our volunteers. This process causes us to connect to others. For instance, our local newspaper ran several front page stories about the process. CES is never on the first page.”

“I think this is an honest return to what Extension is all about, when Extension had a larger community development role.”

CES Leader

Throughout the following three sections are additional examples of how CES saw new avenues for outreach, which is at the heart of the Land-Grant University (and CES) Mission.

New Partnerships Resulting from Civic Engagement

Both leadership and agents acknowledged the growth of community partnerships and connections as a result of the Tide initiative. For evidence of these connections to have filtered up to the leadership level in such a short time is significant in and of itself. Here are some of the comments that Extension leaders made regarding these new relationships:

- The community is now connected to the county Extension office, which is a positive step forward.
- We have a whole lot of new non-traditional Extension partners.
- In [city], the City Council has asked our agents to help organize study circles across their whole community to address violence.
- We’ve found that in our state, it has strengthened CES’ presence in the community. The community was not aware of all the services CES has to offer.

The agents responding to the question regarding growth in partnerships resulting from Tide (N=17) stated an almost unanimous “yes.” There were two exceptions to this finding. One agent noted that strong partnerships were already in place in the county prior to Tide while the second indicated a more limited directly involved on the county level left the agent feeling unsure about the changes, thus declining to comment either way.

For agents who did express an opinion, several claimed that new partnerships were established with a wide array of entities including elected officials, schools, Housing Authority, citizen groups, civic groups, faith-based organizations, for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, social service agencies and ethnic groups. Several agents also

noted connections with individuals and the strengthening of connections within the community in more general terms. Here are some of their comments:

- The study circles model appears to have created new networks within the county.
- I got to know study circle participants on a more personal level and understand their passion and reasons for participating.
- Citizens completely trust me and are more willing to work with me.
- I've worked in a specific area of our county that I had not worked in before and all of the players were individuals that I had not worked with before.
- More citizens KNOW who is Cooperative Extension and what we provide.

New and Different Opportunities

A sizable majority of agents saw Tide as instrumental in opening new opportunities for CES to work in the target sites. In fact, all of the Year Two agents and six of the ten Year One agents had positive stories to tell. Even among the four Year One “no’s” were two agents that said “not yet” but were anticipating opportunities. Some of the new opportunities mentioned were in connection to new partners as noted in the section above. Others were expanding CES’ ability to reach new groups with existing programs. Still others reported expansion to new issues that CES was now helping address in the community. Here are examples that reflect the involvement of Extension in new areas of activity:

- We are looking at dropout prevention and working with college students as math mentors which is way out of the norm, but those are things that have surfaced.
- We've never (or at least in recent history) really had any community development or leadership programs in the target sites. Nor have we had any sustainable interest on the part of the county [CES] staff in community development programs. We now have developed some relationships with the county staff and they have seen some small, but immediate successes. However, we still have a really long way to go.
- The local Extension office became a site for the mobile food pantry - a local food bank. Also, the partnership with Massey Cancer Center outreach led to the formation of a regional health coalition and played a big role in providing resources at the mobile dental clinic that was held in the county.
- I've been asked to serve on a variety of committees! I'm now involved in forming a new health coalition.

Benefits and Value of Involving Citizens

Clear examples of benefits CES sees for involving citizens in community decision-making were interspersed throughout the discussion with Extension leaders. An often noted benefit was that Tide helped bring together a large portion of the community to work together on generating possibilities, exploring creative uses of local assets, and fostering hope in these traditionally distressed communities. “Now there are bigger

groups seeing what the possibilities are, how to use assets to get moving,” commented one leader. Another noted, “The people felt so sad, so hopeless. But by the end of the process, they had a process and plans. There was a beginning of hope.”

Another noteworthy benefit is the new respect among different people and perspectives that Tide fostered. For instance, in one community, “High school students turned out to be the participants. Adults were surprised that the youth were right on target to what the adults thought. This gave a different look to youth voices and their importance.” One leader simply stated, “People in our communities are talking that have never talked to each other before.”

“This is a good opportunity to get the community to think differently. Instead of ‘What grant can we get’ or ‘What groups can come do for us?’ they begin thinking, ‘What can we do for ourselves?’ and ‘What assets do we have?’”

CES Leader

In addition to these community-based benefits, leaders also saw some potential benefits for CES. In one state for instance, community development initiatives have been cut. “This [Tide] gives us a new way to get back into communities,” commented that state’s CES leader. Several leaders also saw a vision for how the CES traditional Advisory Councils could morph into a more collaborative system. “Usually we have an Advisory Council that tells Extension what to do. This will be different. Instead of Extension agents leaving the room with 12 new tasks, this approach says what are WE [Advisors and CES] going to do as partners?”

Perception of Citizens’ Roles in Resolving Difficult Community Issues

When asked if their perception of the role of citizens had changed as a result of their involvement in Tide, agent responses were almost equally divided (9=yes; 10=no). The reasoning that followed their answers, though, proves to be quite encouraging. Those that reported no change in their perception went on to state that they already believed that citizens have a significant role to play. The most consistent perspective voiced by these agents is a continuing belief that meaningful, sustainable change can only happen when citizens have ownership from the bottom up. As one agent put it, “Community issues are never completely resolved from the top down. Community engagement and citizen involvement is critical in addressing community issues.”

“Solutions must come from the bottom up by the citizens and cannot be solved alone by money or outside forces. The Tide program is a classic example of teaching a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

CES Agent

While these agents voiced continued support for their preexisting belief in the importance of citizen involvement, several of them also noted new insights that they gained from Tide. For instance, while endorsing the importance of citizen engagement, two agents noted that they saw an increased need for leadership support. Two others explicitly stated the importance of

providing a structure to help citizens find their voices, noting that Tide provided that opportunity. Another commented on being pleased that others were seeing the value of this work, while one other agent noted how hard it was to get citizens to the table.

Nine agents reported a shift in their perspectives of citizens' roles. In particular, many indicated that the circles process brought people together from diverse backgrounds. Others made specific mention of actions that took place because of Tide. Still others noted more deep rooted shifts. The following are key statements offered by the agents in their own words:

- [Tide] provides community residents with a set of skills and an avenue to resolve community issues greater than other skill sets used in Extension work in the past.
- I now believe that citizens are the only ones that can sustain an effort and that change that is generated by local citizens are long-termed.
- I was not so aware that citizens want to be engaged.
- The capacity building aspect of preparing to execute Tide is extremely valuable. Also, the entire process is direct and results driven. As such, participants truly feel like (and are!) an integral part of the process as well as the means for taking action. This direct participation, along with the broad applicability of the process, really allows participants to see how they address poverty issues in the short term and how the entire process can be adapted to address many different concerns in the community.

Shifts from the “Expert” to “Co-learner” Perspectives and Responses

One of the clearest shifts in leadership perspectives appears in the discussion of roles for CES when it comes to community issues. During pre-focus group discussions, the leadership was almost unanimous in stating that an agent's role in community issues was to educate or provide unbiased information to CES audiences. Very little evidence surfaced to indicate that these leaders had considered the “co-learner” model as a viable role for agents. However, a clear shift was evident in the ways in which the leadership described the work of Tide in the pilot sites. Here are some of the comments that indicate change:

- The agents had to get the community to understand that solutions to problems were going to come from them, not from outsiders.
- One of the challenges we faced was that the community wants an expert to come in and tell them what to do. It was hard for them to understand that there was no “Super Extension Guy” coming in to tell them what to do.
- The town was very receptive to the Extension agent. Everybody wanted you to tell them what to do. It took some work to help them understand that you were not going to tell them what to do. They would have to come up with that themselves.
- At first our agents thought they had to be at every circle. Once they understood their job was to build capacity and not do it all, it went fine.

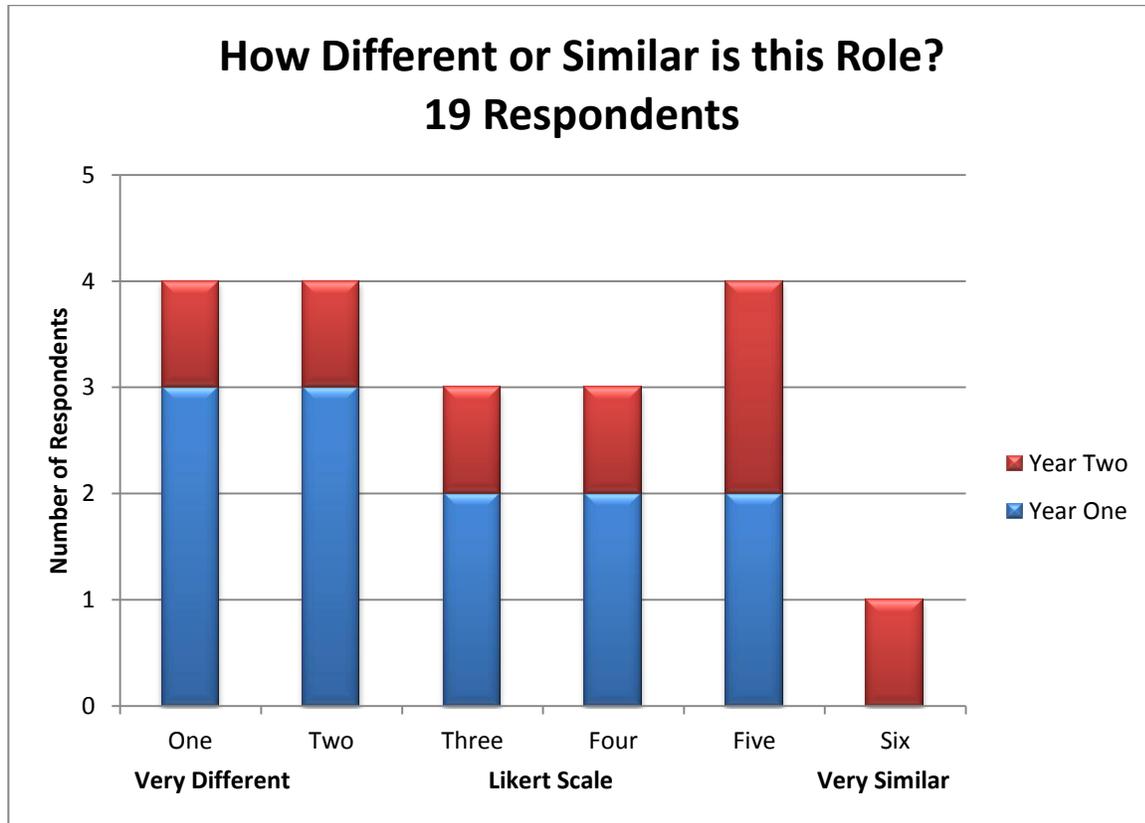
- The agents do not have to be experts in everything related to subject matter because someone else in the community may have it. They do have to have expertise in facilitation. Not necessarily content, but in facilitation skills and managing groups.
- The group takes ownership. In one community there was a concern that one person running for office was in the organizing group. The group decided that was not a good role. It didn't fall on the Extension agent to make the decision. The group decided and owned it.
- Agents need to be in the job of empowering community, not doing it all themselves. We do not have as many "boots on the ground." How do you empower the community to do for themselves? This has been our message to county agents recently.

These encouraging shifts were coupled with a few struggles from past models that may still need to be addressed. First, one leader noted that if the SRDC or CES are the ones that write the discussion guides, agents may be more receptive than using guides written by other agencies or organizations. Agents have become accustomed to the standards that CES uses in developing materials and are often uncertain about material from other sources. This is a valid concern when delivering traditional expert-model presentations since so many sources of misinformation exist on important topics. The second challenge that still lurks in the minds of leaders is how to gauge impacts for reporting purposes when the process and project take place in a co-learner setting. Traditional CES reporting centers around programs delivered, numbers reached, and knowledge gained. The work of civic engagement through the co-learner lens does not translate well into the current reporting mechanisms. Leadership, however, did not speak of this as a "deal breaker," but rather a place where careful thought and planning would be needed in order to meet the current reporting demands.

With the leadership expressing support for these shifting roles, understanding how agents view the roles becomes the next focal point. Agents in both Year One and Year Two were asked to rate how different or similar they viewed the civic engagement role as compared to past roles they have played in CES. The question posed used a six point Likert Scale with 1=Very Different and 6=Very Similar. While responses were mixed, there was a leaning toward viewing the roles as different from the past, particularly among Year One agents. Those that tended to say the roles were similar went on to state that they had already been involved in group facilitation, civic engagement, or some other work in CES that held some likenesses to the Tide role. One of those noted, though, that, "the study circle process is slightly different [from past roles]. I was excited to have a new tool in the Extension tool kit."

Those that rated their work with Tide as a very distinct role from their more traditional activities pointed to an array of differences. Two agents discussed the sheer scale of the process as being somewhat unusual to them, noting that they had not ever helped coordinate a community or county wide event. Several also pointed to the realm of "community development" as unique. Within the usual CES structure, four subject matter programs exist: (1) Agriculture and Natural Resources, (2) Community

Development, (3) Family and Consumer Science, and (4) 4H and Youth Development. Within CES, there are fewer dedicated community development agents than any of the other three areas. Most states have an expectation that community development will happen, but assign few, if any agents directly to address that arena. Thus, most of the agents in Tide more closely identified with one of the other three program areas. Interestingly, though, while these agents seem to view this work as community development, the resulting Action Teams have tackled issues that are of relevance to all of the four major program areas.



One of the more prevalent differences that CES agents saw between Tide and previous roles is that of “educator or leader” vs. “co-learner or capacity builder.” While the use of terms varies within the responses, a shift from being in the “driver’s seat” to a more collaborative or capacity-building role seems to have taken hold. Here are some of their comments:

- I have mostly worked on specific topics/ subject matter [in the past].
- Most of my work has been with direct instruction as opposed to this which was more indirect teaching and leading.
- Volunteers were facilitating groups. Typically, Extension agents serve as facilitators.
- Facilitating rather than guiding programming is somewhat different.

Finally, one other difference was noteworthy, “One main difference is the follow-up support. Usually once a training or meeting was held I had limited contact with the community.” This comment relates back to previous roles of being the educator. CES is often called upon to present one-time programs on a particular topic. Often this is a single point of contact with the participants with little or no on-going connections with these individuals. From the other comments related to time commitment of Tide and to following through with new networks and actions, this single comment is a clear pointer to how this shift will impact the work of CES.

Strengthening CES’ Commitment to the Process of Civic Engagement

For most of the Tide states, the intentional work of advancing civic engagement was a new venture. During pre-surveys and initial focus groups, many agents and Extension leadership expressed some uncertainty about embracing this as a new arena of work in the CES. Thus, as the first year closed, gauging shifts in the commitment of Tide states to a more active involvement of citizens in deliberating and acting on tough issues is worth tracking.

During post focus groups, Extension leaders were asked about their plans for strengthening or expanding the work of civic engagement within their respective states. The support they voiced for the importance of this work was encouraging, yet several insights regarding the challenges with this type of work were proffered. Given the timing of the initiative, when the impacts of the economic decline were taking their toll on university budgets, several leaders were clearly struggling with how to meet the demands associated with the Tide effort or other civic engagement works in the context of dwindling Extension people and fiscal resources. One pilot state had already faced a 22% reduction in staff and was anticipating another 16% in the coming weeks. “Do we want to continue this work? Yes,” reported this leader, “But I’m not sure how we can continue.” Another leader spoke along a similar vein, “How do we follow through with fewer people? We still owe it to these groups to continue to help in follow through. We got the ball rolling, but I think these groups still need a little push to build confidence to keep going.” Balancing for competing time demands, as noted in the pre-focus group, remained a matter of concern. Yet, even with this concern, one leader noted, “The issue I heard is time – everyone’s plate is full. So, this is something I need to do, but what do I give up? This was different because it yielded something in the end. We need to invest time where there is a yield.”

“My comfort level with this program has certainly increased.”
CES Leader

While some concerns were expressed, the overwhelming tone of the leadership’s response to strengthening this work was positive and strong. Several talked of specific efforts to expand Tide to other parts of the state, while other talked about branching out to new topics. One leader, in particular, referred back to the concept of Advisory Councils – an entity that he stated in our initial focus group meeting served as one of

CES' best public outreach methods. This leader gained a broader vision of what could emerge as a more engaging structure for CES' involvement in the community. He stated his vision in these words, "I can see us moving toward program development teams or leadership teams instead of traditional Advisory Councils. These teams become part of planning, delivering and advocating, not just advising." This, in fact, is exactly what is happening in one of the Year Two sites as reported by one of the agents on a recent team call. Tide participants are joining a newly formed Leadership Council that will be working hand-in-hand with the CES agent to help foster progress among the Action Teams formed as a result of Tide.

"The process has the potential to not only help people involved, but help the whole state."

CES Leader

As Extension leaders continued discussing their commitments to civic engagement, focus turned to elements for promoting sustainability. One of the consistent needs they expressed was a way to tell the story in order to show public value and impacts of this work. This, they believed, would help provide the leverage they needed as leaders to help foster ongoing support for this type of effort within their organizations. This encouragement was part of what prompted the Southern Rural Development Center to develop a series of impact reports for the Year One sites during the summer of 2011.

Whether or not support for civic work was being communicated to agents by Extension administrators was the next question explored. When agents were asked if they had observed positive shifts by Extension leaders in terms of embracing citizen dialogue around complex local issues, responses proved less consistent relative to the views expressed directly by the Extension leadership. While nearly two thirds of the agents had perceived an increased support from Extension leaders in this arena, the remaining had either not experienced support or had claimed these leaders had shown mixed support. Those expressing positive support from their Extension leaders stated the following:

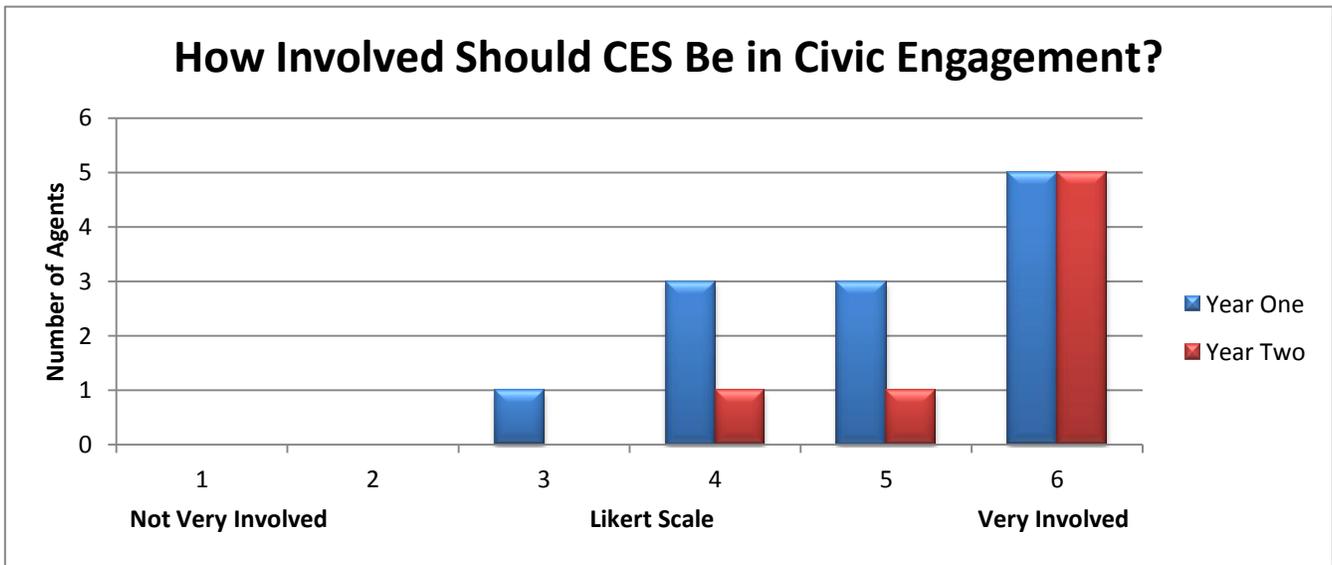
- My Extension administrator has said this work once scared him but he's learned that it has great potential.
- All my administrators on area and state levels have verbally shared their positive encouragement for Tide. They think this can carry over to other local issues.
- Our direct supervisor is very much in favor of our using this method or other methods of civic engagement to facilitate change in our communities.
- I have seen more public and vocal support of this work by Extension administration.
- They are supporting the effort and a contact with the State Department of Education has been made. They see the Tide project as a way to begin dialog for improvement in failing school districts.

Year Two agents reported less support, but talked about the need to inform the Extension leadership about the project. Part of this difference in support agents perceived from Year One and Year Two leaders may have been directly impacted by the focus group sessions. Since the Tide research process directly brought the project to intentional discussion with the Year One leadership, the fact that those leaders were more aware and vocal in their reactions is not surprising. One Year Two agent, though, noted that, “There is a great deal of excitement among some of our administrators to see these efforts undertaken. We have also adopted a goal in our statewide 5-year strategic plan related to facilitation, leadership and civic engagement.”

“I’m encouraged by how well the county Extension staff and the public responded. It helps me know I’m on the right track in support/encouraging this work.”

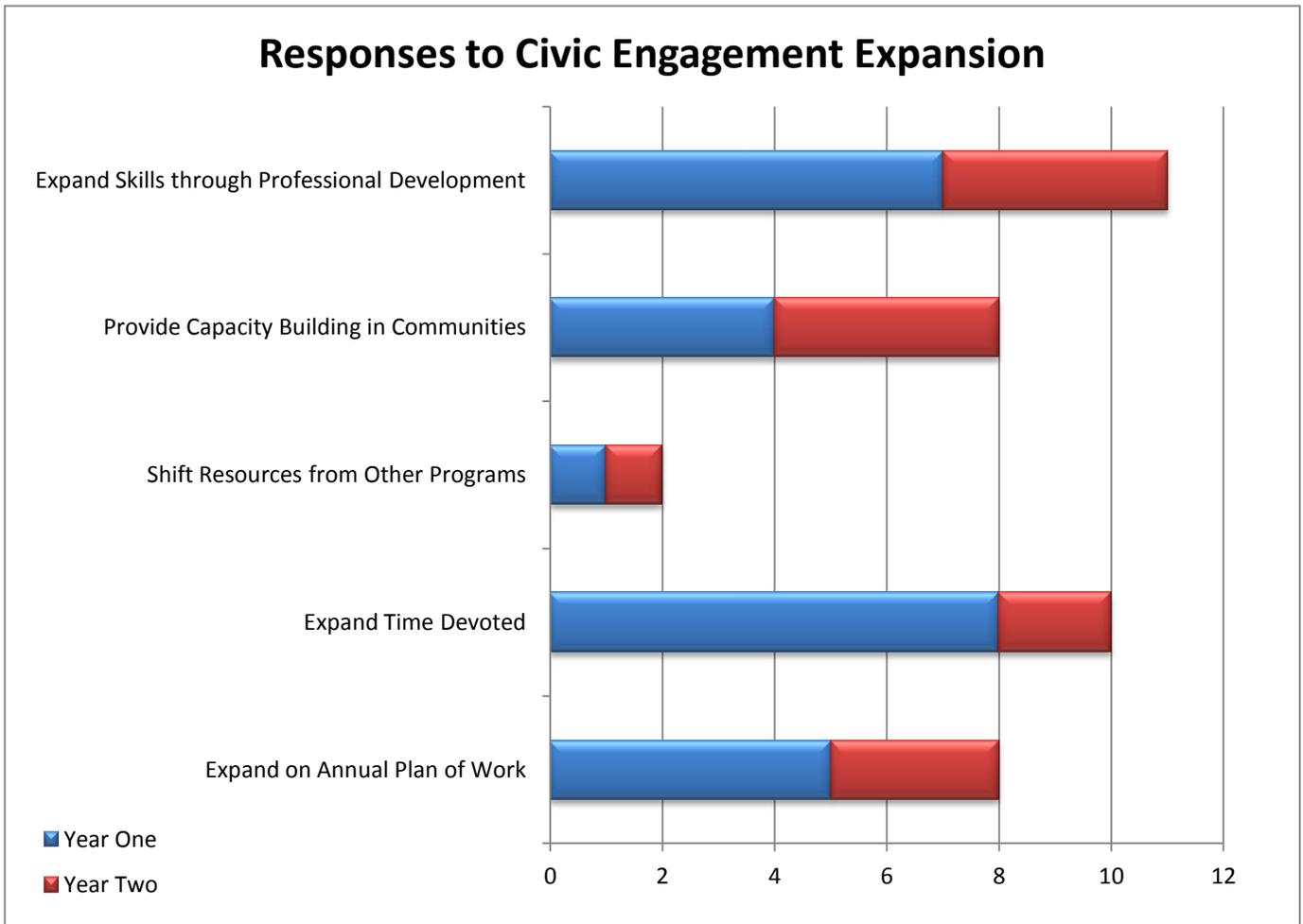
CES Agent

While Extension leaderships’ perspectives on expanding the work of civic engagement can have a profound impact on the agents’ ability to respond, capturing the agents’ views on CES’ involvement in this work is critical as well. Agents were asked to rate how involved they thought CES should be in promoting civic engagement through study circles or other similar activities in the future, using a six point Likert scale with 1 being “not very involved” and 6 being “very involved.” The chart below depicts their responses. Simply put, the data provide strong support for continuing this work.



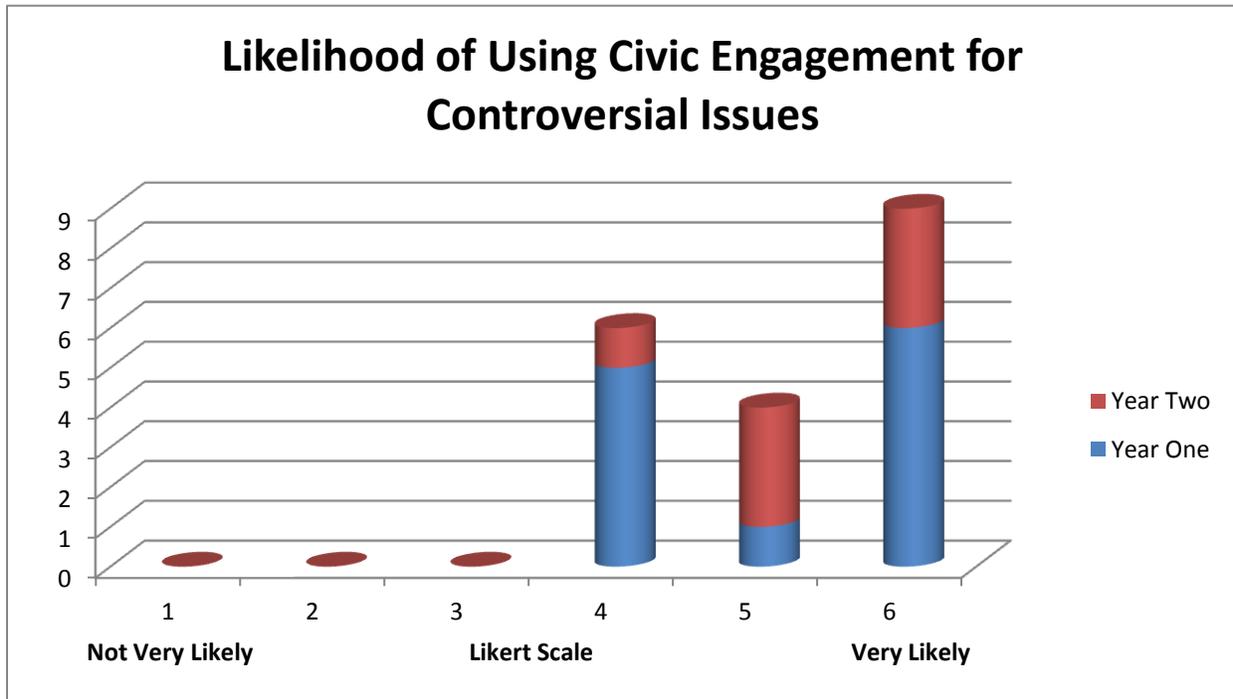
While a small number of agents (n= 4) either stated they did not plan to continue the work of civic engagement or were not sure about continuing, a good three quarters of the agents (n=13) stated that they plan to continue the work they have begun in involving citizens in community issues. Several specifically noted continued support for Action Teams resulting directly from Tide. Others had plans to expand to other issues within the community or to new communities. Some noted here that the increased connections to the community are resulting in a greater interest in having CES involved.

As one agent put it, “Citizens have gathered other resources and are anxious for a collaborative team.” The chart below gives a sense of how agents are planning to adjust current demands to allow for the additional work of civic engagement over the next year.



Perspectives of CES Agents' Use of Civic Engagement for Controversial Issues

The skewed results reported in the following chart paint an encouraging story. Agents were asked, “If you are working with a community on a tough issue in the future, how likely are you to recommend study circles (or a similar citizen engagement approach as a way to seek solutions?” Responses to this question were captured along a six-point Likert Scale, ranging from “not very likely” (a value of 1) to “very likely” (a value of 6).



Given that responses from agents were concentrated on the “likely” side of the continuum, we began to look at factors that could impede the ability of agents to pursue this type of work. The single most frequently noted barrier to using this process appears to be the time commitment, on the part of both the agent and community members. “I think [Study Circles] is a really good technique. However, the process required a tremendous amount of effort on our part and it was difficult to get participants (including county staff) to take ownership.” Another voiced concern for the community members, “I would be very much in favor of a similar process with less of a time commitment on behalf of participants. Working parents of small children found it difficult to attend evening sessions, but didn't have the flexibility at work to attend daytime meetings. Perhaps making the process a one-time meeting would work better in some communities.”

Closely related to the issue of time is the balance between discussion/studying and action. Some agents felt some participants became restless over the five week period

of discussion and wanted to move on to action. Others seemed to recognize that tough issues take longer to resolve before action can take place. “Because of involving a diverse group of people over a period of time, you cannot seek a solution to a tough issue in a 30-minute meeting.” Yet another agent noted that the process has its place, but may not always be the right solution for every problem. “Some people do not have the time to study but may be willing to take action. A study circle is a good method for a complex issue like poverty. An issue like community clean-up probably doesn't need to be studied. We can see the litter. This response simply needs to be organized, if it is what is concerning people. Now, if you want to understand why the trash keeps piling up, then a study circle could be most helpful.”

Overall, though, agents saw the study circle process as:

- A great tool for civic engagement and a method to create buy in from the grassroots level;
- A beneficial way to move people to action;
- A mechanism to help people view topics from different perspectives; and
- A very flexible and inclusive way of addressing community issues.

Parting Thoughts from the CES Agents

At the close of the post-survey with CES agents from both Years One and Two, individuals were asked the following open-ended question, “Is there anything else you would like to share with us regarding your experience with TTP and the study circles process?” Most responses mirrored comments noted elsewhere in this report. However, these five seemed particularly striking:

- The counties that need this process the most may not see it as a need.
- Lesson learned: Do not assume that everything will follow a schedule and be willing to stop and restart if need be.
- This is a great process. Anyone who works with helping people improve their quality of life should give it a try.
- This was challenging. However, it did a better job of encouraging participants to take responsibility for their outcomes than most leadership programs do. In the long run, I think it has the potential for helping communities to learn how to take responsibility for themselves.
- Thank you for involving our county/state! Originally, I didn't think it could be done and was dreading the opportunity. To date, the action plan has gained much respect, support, and financial support.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Three key points surfaced through this analysis. Each one has implications for communities, individuals, and CES. These are outlined below:

A diverse population seems willing to join in civic dialogue related to community issues. However, addressing deeply rooted racial divides may be essential in order to foster participation among individuals of varying cultures, experiences and perspectives. At the same time, involvement in Tide has helped strengthen the nature and level of dialogue among those with limited history of speaking with one another in the past. Implications:

- **Communities:** Offer a wide range of opportunities for community members to talk in non-threatening ways. Seek to intentionally address barriers that may exist among various groups.
- **Individuals:** Taking time to be involved in community activities, such as civic dialogues, may strengthen the level of connectivity and trust that individuals have with one another in the community.
- **CES:** In light of CES' commitment to reaching a wide array of people, organizations and community, committing time, energy and resources to advancing civic discourse and action can help Extension reach new audiences in ways that align with its mission.

The presence of a local champion seems vital to the initiation and sustainability of both dialogue and community action. This may also be closely linked to the correlation between civic involvement on the individual level and the presence of leadership training opportunities within the community. Implications:

- **Communities:** Offer community leadership opportunities and make them available to a variety of citizens. Encourage civic participation through community events and other avenues that are likely to appeal to a broad range of citizens.
- **Individuals:** Be willing to be the champion. While it may seem intimidating, the enthusiasm that you, as a citizen, express may make the difference in the success of the important work in your community. It is citizens that generate enthusiasm in a community. Elected officials cannot work alone.
- **CES:** Some communities need someone with vision to show them the possibilities. While helping people understand the value of promoting civic engagement is challenging, the hard work is well worth the results of more people taking up the charge to get involved. It is important to invest time in helping citizens catch the vision.

Investments in civic engagement often translate into increases in citizen participation, innovative partnerships, and new collaborations on important local issues.

- **Communities:** Communicate and demonstrate a willingness to include citizens as community partners in matters of common concern. Rely less on the formal, traditional “city hall” settings for discussion of challenging local issues, as many see these as intimidating. Rather, create less formal avenues for engaging in civic discourse, ones that allow individuals to feel more comfortable expressing their thoughts.
- **Individuals:** Simply put, join in. Invest the time to be a part of an opportunity to address a concern in your community.
- **CES:** Investing in civic engagement expands the opportunity for CES to link to new audiences and partnerships, linkages that are vital to the success of CES. While the amount of time invested in promoting civic engagement may be much higher than the more traditional education programming roles played by Extension educators, the resulting leveraging of people and resources that occurs may be vital to sustaining CES during these lean economic times. Likewise, learning to tell the success stories in clear, effective terms may also help generate or sustain support for this promising work.

Future Research:

Additional investigation is needed into the potential links among the identified focus group/key informant themes. While some apparent links were identified, research that digs more deeply into these issues is warranted. Completion of the data collection from the Year Two sites will provide one opportunity to investigate these connections further.

Early Successes in Year Two Sites

Year Two Sites Launched	2010 Population	Facilitators	Study Circles	Participants
Pine Bluff (AR) Jefferson County	49,083 77,435	14	5	24
Immokalee (FL) Collier County	24,154 321,520	31	8	132
Ahoskie (NC) Hertford County	5,039 24,669	3	1	15
Emporia City (VA) Greensville County	5,927 18,170	8	1	11

Pine Bluff, Jefferson County, Arkansas

- Community wide Action Forum combined with a Resource Fair – complete, 400 in attendance, 40+ organizations participating
- Jefferson County Resource Directory – compiled, seeking ways to distribute.
- More teams in the process of forming

Immokalee, Collier County, Florida:

- Eden Park –
 - Create a safe path from school to park to promote healthy, safe recreation.
 - Increase opportunities for disadvantaged youth to participate in sports
- Front Porch – recording of Black history in Immokalee
- Grace’s Adults with Disabilities – seeking a location where adults with disabilities can congregate for social support
- Community Gardens at the Farm Workers’ Village – to promote access to low cost, high nutritional value fresh fruits and vegetables, coupled with workshops of health issues

Ahoskie, Hertford County, North Carolina:

- Read, Lead, Succeed – Increase low income students’ access to novels and other books that compliment the Herford County Public School curriculum. Plans are to also put books in the hands of the children’s parents so that adults can model reading at home.

Emporia City, Greensville County, Virginia:

- Workforce development – looking for ways to enhance workforce training opportunities. (In direct response to the recent closing of a major employer in the community)
- Mobile Food Pantry – working to meet the needs of hungry families that do not have ready access to a food bank

- Regional health consortium – helping meet the health and dental needs of low income families
- Community pride and beautification – seeking to restore community pride through clean-up activities and community gardens
- Youth opportunities in education and arts – providing opportunities for low income youth to explore artistic talents and learn about other places through field trips.

Cooperative Extension Service Agents that Responded to Surveys

	Single County/Parish	Multiple County Parish	Statewide
Year One – Pre	6	3	3
Year Two - Pre	5	2	
Year One - Post	4	4	4
Year Two - Post	2	0	5