

What distinguishes places that

- **you grow up in and want to get out of**
- **places you just stay**
- **places people want to come to?**

What distinguishes the people who choose these alternatives?

In essence these are four different questions. The answer, however, is similar for all. I believe that it is not what or who the community is, but how you identify yourself as an individual within that community and whether or not the values of the community support this self identification.

On a recent visit to the Museum of History in Raleigh, the Historian gave a talk on the viewing habits of the public when touring exhibits. He contends that the general attendee walks through an exhibit scanning for their personal story. When they find it, they stop, read and examine this portion. I believe that this translates to community, in that when we look at a community, we are looking for ourselves. When we find our story, or identify with a community, we stop and stay for a while or forever.

The question of what distinguishes a place that people want to come to interests me the most. Having spent time searching for a place to live, a place that I identify with, I have thought about this question a great deal. Richard Florida addresses this question in an article in the *Washington Monthly* about his recently published book titled *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In this book, he discusses geographic areas which are attracting a technologically savvy, creative, diverse segment of the population. Florida (2002) contends that these communities are the places that will burgeon new ideas and continue to grow

and develop due to their diversity and the types of people that are attracted to living there.

Why do some places become destinations for the creative while others don't? ... Places that thrive in today's world tend to be ... places where people can find opportunity, build support structures, be themselves, and not get stuck in any one identity.
(Florida, 2002)

Many factors apply when discussing what distinguishes those that might stay, leave or move to a certain location. In the December 2001 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, David Brooks wrote an article describing the differing personalities of 'blue' (Democrat) and 'red' (Republican) states as seen in the 2000 election results. In his demographic profiles of two specific 'red' and 'blue' counties, Brooks (2001) presented some overall statistics. The 'red' county had a higher church attendance, lower average income, lower educational level and higher societal satisfaction level. What I found most interesting was the shift in societal focus between the counties.

Some of the people I met in ... [the 'red'] County were just getting by. Some were in debt and couldn't afford to buy their kids the Christmas presents they wanted to. But I didn't find many who assessed their own place in society according to their income. Rather, the people I met commonly told me that although those in affluent places like Manhattan and Bethesda might make more money and have more-exciting jobs, they are the unlucky ones, because they don't get to live in ... [the 'red'] County. They don't get to enjoy the beautiful green hillsides, the friendly people, the wonderful church groups and volunteer organizations. They may be nice people and all, but they are certainly not as happy as we are.
(Brooks, 2001)

Although these are only generalities, it would seem that citizens of 'red' states would be more likely to stay in their own community or to move to another 'red'

state. I would also contend that the same holds true for 'blue' state citizens due to a self-identification, to a feeling that this place holds similar people and is a place where one would belong.

What does diversity mean and how do we come to understand how diverse a community is?

Diversity means different things to different people. I believe that the widely accepted understanding is a mix of ethnic and/or racial cultures within a community. Diversity can also mean a mix of economics, gender, age, sexual preference, or of any quality which the community defines as separate and different than the norm.

In assessing a community, it is important, first, to define who the average citizen of that town is. This can be brought about by studying the demographics of the town, as we discussed in class. Once a profile of the majority of the citizens is denoted, through these same demographics, one can see where diversity comes into play.

In Brooks' (2001) 'red' vs. 'blue' article, he chose the following characteristics to assess his two counties:

- Ethnic diversity
- Education level
- Income level
- Major employers
- Voting patterns
- Real estate prices and Living expenses
- Religious beliefs/practices
- Population

In first assessing these characteristics, we can come to understand how diverse a community is. Diversity, however, goes beyond sheer numbers. I believe that diversity is also seen within how accepting a community is to its differences.

How and when do communities change?

I believe that communities, like people, change when they are ready and want to change. Change occurs when there is a catalyst affecting the characteristics which Brooks (2001) listed as important to assessing a community, such as:

- A new leader coming into office
- Population growth or attrition
- Industry arriving or leaving or a change in the major industry
- A central change to the community— such as a change to a community university, a major event occurring in the town (a tragedy such as September 11 or an event such as the Olympics) or a public issue arising causing polarity

Often times, communities find the need to change for self preservation.

The late economist Mancur Olson long ago noted that the decline of nations and regions is a product of an organizational and cultural hardening of the arteries he called "institutional sclerosis?" Places that grow up and prosper in one era, Olson argued, find it difficult and often times impossible to adopt new organizational and cultural patterns, regardless of how beneficial they might be. Consequently, innovation and growth shift to new places, which can adapt to and harness these shifts for their benefit. (Florida, 2002)

An interesting example of positive community change is Austin, Texas.

Florida (2002) interviews a young techno-worker in the beginning of his article who is choosing to leave his hometown of Pittsburgh for Austin. Although Austin does not offer the major sports teams or cultural activities that Pittsburgh does,

the young man being interviewed replied that "...he felt [Pittsburgh] lacked the lifestyle options, cultural diversity, and tolerant attitude that would make it attractive to him. As he summed it up: 'How would I fit in here?'" (Florida, 2002)

In looking at the three questions that I chose regarding why someone chooses a community, what is diversity and why communities changes, I found a striking similarity in both my assessment and the answers to these questions. Individual characteristics and how these line up with community play a large role in community choice. Assessment of community diversity can be found not only in sheer demographics, but in civic involvement and societal attitudes, such as tolerance for differences. Communities change based on changing diversities and the populace that chooses to move to, stay or leave a community. These three factors cannot be assessed separately, but are all intertwined in the definition of a community.

References

Brooks, David. (2001). One Nation, Slightly Divisible. (cultural divide of Middle America). *The Atlantic Monthly*, 288, 53-67. Retrieved October 22, 2002 from Expanded Academic ASAP database.

Florida, Richard. (2002). The Rise of the Creative Class. *Washington Monthly*, 34, 15-26. Retrieved October 19, 2002 from Academic Search Elite database.