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## Planning the future of Connecting Young Nebraskans: The evolution of a virtual community

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# Planning the future of **CONNECTING YOUNG NEBRASKANS**

*The evolution of a virtual community*

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Andrea N. Gebhart  
University of Nebraska



a professional project

# **Planning the future of Connecting Young Nebraskans: The evolution of a virtual community**

by Andrea N. Gebhart

Presented to the Faculty of the Community & Regional Planning Program  
at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln for the Degree of Master of  
Community and Regional Planning

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Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2013



## project overview

# ABSTRACT

Connecting Young Nebraskans (CYN) is a statewide network designed to connect, empower and retain young Nebraskans. Due to the geographic spread of its members, the CYN network functions as a virtual community—a group of people who primarily interact through electronic means. With CYN approaching a period of organizational transition, this project is a social and community plan for CYN. The project describes the network, summarizes the key issues facing the network, and recommends strategies to minimize issues and strengthen the network. More specifically, the plan addresses how CYN can evolve so as to ensure the sustainability and continued success of the network. As the basis for developing alternatives and a recommendation for CYN to move forward, this project synthesizes the findings of three independent but related endeavors. First, this project summarizes and discusses the implications of current research relevant to virtual communities, with an emphasis on the attributes and sustainability factors of virtual communities. Second, this project summarizes and discusses the implications of a recent social network analysis performed on the CYN network by an outside firm. Third, this project summarizes and discusses the implications of a two-part, virtual facilitated model building exercise that was conducted with the network's steering committee. After completion of the three project endeavors, there was thoughtful synthesis and reflection regarding the project, complete with recommendations for the CYN network. This final document was prepared with the intent to help the current CYN network leadership explore the best alternatives and options for CYN as it moves forward, as well as to identify how the network can remain relevant and beneficial to its members.

Keywords: virtual community attributes, factors of virtual community sustainability, social network analysis, virtual networks, social and community plan, Connecting Young Nebraskans



## project overview

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## project overview

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# chapter one

## HISTORY OF CYN

### section 1.1

#### ABOUT CYN

CYN is a network of 21- to 40-year olds, and is guided by its mission statement:

Connecting Young Nebraskans (CYN) is a statewide network designed to connect, empower and retain young Nebraskans. CYN strives to enhance opportunities for individuals to impact their communities through networking and learning experiences. The network is a dynamic and diverse group of peers with a passion for making a difference, a willingness to learn, and a desire to build important relationships to help shape the future of Nebraska (Connecting Young Nebraskans [CYN], 2013).

In addition to its mission statement, the foundation of CYN is rooted in four beliefs. First, young Nebraskans are untapped social resources that struggle engaging with their communities and the state in a meaningful way (CYN, 2013, “We believe”). Second, young people provide a vital fusion of ideas, energy and passion for Nebraska—this fusion is critical to building a strong future for Nebraska (CYN, 2013, “We believe”). Third, to ensure the success of Nebraska as a state, there must be a serious, long-term investment made in the next generation (CYN, 2013, “We believe”). Fourth, across the state of Nebraska there are many similarities and differences, but by sharing interests, concerns and ideas, young Nebraskans can collectively create actionable next steps to drive progress in the state (CYN, 2013, “We believe”).

With support from the University of Nebraska Rural Initiative, the CYN network was cultivated and developed through the efforts of CYN Coordinator Kayla Schnuelle and the CYN Steering Committee—a group of young Nebraskans with valuable connections and who understand the importance of the network. A relatively loose-knit network, CYN primarily interacts through various social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, an e-mail listserv, and an annual face-to-face meeting called the CYN Summit.

CYN strives to create a more connected Nebraska through education, empowerment and leadership. While members come from a variety of professions, all members have a passion for making a difference and the desire to build meaningful relationships. Although the network is primarily comprised of 21- to 40-year olds, CYN believes that “young” is a mindset and invites people of all ages to join the network.

Developed to encourage young Nebraskans to become involved and engaged with their communities, the network has no formal membership process and no membership fees. Those who follow online or participate in CYN events and conversations are considered members of the network. Members are able to opt out of the network at any time by simply disassociating from CYN's social media platforms or by asking Schnuelle to remove their name from the CYN database. While opting out of the network is an option, few people leave the network after joining (Schnuelle, 2012).

## section 1.2

### THE BEGINNING

As a program of the University of Nebraska, the Rural Initiative sought to focus the knowledge, skills and creativity of a four-campus university system on stabilizing and enhancing the economy and quality of life in non-metropolitan Nebraska. Recognizing that young Nebraskans play a significant role in the future of the state, Sandy Scofield, the director of the Rural Initiative, and Schnuelle, an employee of the Rural Initiative, conducted a series of listening sessions across the state of Nebraska in 2009. Gaining input from young Nebraskans in every region of the state, Scofield and Schnuelle hoped to discover (1) what young Nebraskans thought about Nebraska; (2) what young Nebraskans felt they needed to succeed; (3) what their communities needed in order to thrive; and (4) how the state could retain motivated young Nebraskans.

After nearly a dozen energetic and passionate listening sessions, Scofield and Schnuelle identified two main themes. First, young Nebraskans have similar challenges across the state, but they had no means to connect with or seek advice from other young Nebraskans (Schnuelle, 2013). Second, many young Nebraskans felt barriers existed between them and their respective communities (Schnuelle, 2013). According to young Nebraskans, oftentimes individuals holding community leadership positions are not very welcoming of young Nebraskans, and in some situations, the leaders even rejected engagement attempts of young Nebraskans (Schnuelle, 2013).

Believing a statewide network could better connect and benefit young Nebraskans, as well as the state, the Rural Initiative provided support for the formation and ongoing activities of CYN. The funding and administrative support was provided to help young Nebraskans develop the tools to work with and within their communities, while also connecting young Nebraskans across the state, and across disciplines. Schnuelle was named coordinator of the network, and some of the young Nebraskans from the listening sessions volunteered to serve on a steering committee.

During the drafting of the mission statement and preliminary development of the group's scope, Schnuelle and the steering committee sought to develop an inclusive group. In fact, they purposely left out the term "young

professionals,” so as to welcome farmers, ranchers, school teachers, nurses and a variety of other professions that may not readily identify as the stereotypical, suit-wearing professional. This network was developed to unify young Nebraskans, regardless of perceived professionalism.

### section 1.3

## THE 2010 CYN SUMMIT

Shortly after the formation of CYN, a brainstorming session involving Schnuelle and the steering committee led to the development of the first annual CYN Summit. Held in October 2010 in Grand Island, Nebraska, the 2010 CYN Summit included a Thursday evening social and a Friday summit. With breakout sessions consisting of three development tracks, the 2010 CYN Summit offered participants opportunities for personal, professional and civic development. The keynote speakers of the summit were father-son duo Paul and Nick Eureka, who spoke on why and how businesses, big and small, can create jobs in rural areas. In addition to personal and professional growth, the summit offered many networking opportunities through coffee shop discussions, networking breaks and regional round tables.

Drawing 131 young Nebraskans from across the state, the 2010 CYN Summit far exceeded the planners' expectations. Nearly one-fourth (24.4%) of the summit attendees came from metropolitan areas (the Nebraska cities of Omaha and Lincoln and the counties of Cass, Douglas, Sarpy, Saunders, Washington, Lancaster and Seward), and the remaining three-fourths (75.6%) came from non-metropolitan areas.

As the inaugural event for CYN, the 2010 CYN Summit left young Nebraskans energized. While actively engaging young Nebraskans from all regions of the state, the summit also served as the catalyst for the formation of several young professional groups, including South Sioux City

Young Professionals.

The 2010 CYN Summit also inspired the young professionals group in Wayne, Nebraska. After renaming their group to Forward Wayne, they hosted a few community events to spur conversations among their younger community members. CYN Coordinator Schnuelle was a guest speaker at one of these community events.



**Photo 1:** The 2010 CYN Summit was held in Grand Island, Nebraska and engaged 131 young Nebraskans from across the state.

A close working relationship was also established between CYN and the coordinators of the Greater Omaha Young Professionals and the Lincoln Young Professionals Group. The intent of this alliance was to prevent duplication in programming and to share resources to help all young Nebraskans.

#### section 1.4

### THE 2011 CYN LEADERSHIP RETREAT

On June 17, 2011, the CYN Steering Committee met in West Point, Nebraska, to reflect on CYN's first year and to begin planning for the 2011 CYN Summit. At this retreat, the CYN Steering Committee acknowledged that CYN had developed a good brand that encouraged conversations. However, the steering committee also felt that CYN was lacking in urban involvement.

Although CYN was developed to help all young Nebraskans better connect, an emphasis was placed on rural young Nebraskans because of the additional challenges rural areas face, especially in terms of population retention. However, CYN was not developed to explicitly serve rural young Nebraskans; therefore, it was determined that CYN needed to do a better job engaging urban young Nebraskans. By embracing all regions of the state, as well as both rural and urban young Nebraskans, it was expected that CYN could better understand and respect differences while working towards the collective goal of making Nebraska a great state in which to live and work.

Another topic of conversation at the retreat was how to best grow the network. One of the ways the steering committee considered growing was through providing decentralized access to the network, through regional hubs, but maintaining centralized leadership. This idea would create several regional sub-networks of CYN, which would presumably interact face-to-face on a regular basis, and all of the sub-networks would convene once a year at the annual CYN summit. The regional sub-networks would be invited and encouraged to interact with the other regional networks, but the regionalism would allow better engagement of network members.

Many of the steering committee members liked this idea, but unfortunately, this concept created administrative demands that CYN Coordinator Schnuelle could not handle alone. The steering committee had proved reliable, but the development of decentralized hubs through volunteerism proved risky for the developing network because the network had no means of holding volunteers accountable. In addition, the steering committee expressed concern that the development of regional hubs might undermine the statewide focus, at least early on in the development of the network.

Also at the retreat, the CYN Steering Committee had its first serious conversation about becoming a stand-alone entity to better serve young



Nebraskans. Namely, by formally breaking away from the University of Nebraska, CYN could become more active in policy and gain political clout. The CYN Steering Committee envisioned Nebraska leaders, political and otherwise, someday coming to CYN for opinions regarding the future of the state. However, this would require CYN to develop a formalized leadership structure. By-laws for a stand-alone organization of non-profit status were drafted by a few of members of the CYN Steering Committee, but as planning for the 2011 CYN Summit picked up, the cumbersome process of transitioning to a stand-alone organization lost its momentum.



**Photo 2:** The 2011 CYN Summit was held in West Point, Nebraska and featured a session that allowed summit attendees to voice their own thoughts on why Nebraska is a great state for young people.

#### section 1.5

### THE 2011 CYN SUMMIT

The 2011 CYN Summit was held in West Point in late October. Similar to 2010, the 2011 summit included a Thursday evening social and Friday summit. Expanding to four development tracks, the summit featured personal, professional, civic and community development sessions. The keynote speakers were Jeff Slobotski and Dusty Davidson, founders of Silicon Prairie News. Called “A Sense of Place,” the keynote address illustrated how important it is for young Nebraskans to be part of the

positive portrayal of Nebraska. The 2011 CYN Summit, once again, featured coffee shop discussions and networking breaks to allow young Nebraskans to connect with one another.

In addition to connecting and growing the network, one of the overarching themes of the 2011 CYN Summit was state pride. Motivated both by the passions young Nebraskans have for their communities and spurred by a critical review of Nebraska’s economic development and state marketing strategies by the advertising agency Archrival, the 2011 CYN Summit urged participants to not apologize for being from Nebraska. Through an afternoon general session, the summit provided a platform for young Nebraskans to explain why Nebraska is not just a “fly-over state”—a non-destination state that travelers fly over when going from coast to coast. What came out of the session was a clear passion for the state and a unified goal of making Nebraska *the state* for young people.

Drawing 168 young Nebraskans from across the state, the 2011 CYN Summit attracted more participants than the summit of the previous year. The 2011 CYN Summit also met the goals of the steering committee members by



engaging more urban young Nebraskans, with 30% of the attendees hailing from Nebraska metropolitan areas and the remaining 70% coming from non-metropolitan areas.

#### section 1.6

### UNITE NEBRASKA

On July 14–15, 2011, 75 young Nebraskans from across the state gathered in Grand Island to talk, listen, think, and dream together about the future of their state (Gerstandt, 2011, Cover). Called UNITE Nebraska, the goal of this gathering was to start the process of developing a shared vision and objectives for the future of Nebraska. There were also two objectives of the two-day event: first, “to uncover the common threads that exist for leaders in different parts of the state,” and second, to develop action plans for steps to be taken and progress to be made on 6-, 12-, and 18-month horizons (Gerstandt, 2011, p. 3). The coordinators of UNITE Nebraska hoped that the event would serve as the launching pad for a variety of initiatives (Gerstandt, 2011, p. 3). (To read more about the history of UNITE Nebraska, see Appendix A.)

UNITE Nebraska was a one-time, invitation-only event that brought together some of the most public, successful and engaged leaders of Nebraska. Due to the limited ability to bring these minds together more frequently, the time at UNITE Nebraska was focused and intense. To maximize the two-day timeframe, UNITE Nebraska utilized a facilitated process called decision acceleration, in which a professional facilitator organized and focused the conversations. This process allowed, even encouraged, diverse perspectives but focused the discussion towards making quality decisions, rapidly.

Throughout UNITE Nebraska, the participants identified five focus areas for Nebraska: (1) education and human capital, (2) state branding and promotion, (3) innovation and infrastructure, (4) sustainability and (5) agriculture. With these five areas in mind, the participants developed a vision for Nebraska: “by 2030, Nebraska will lead global opportunity through a commitment to social and economic innovation” (Gerstandt, 2011, p. 13–14). Then, for each of the five focus areas, the participants developed five-, three- and one-year milestones,



**Photo 3:** Held in Grand Island, Nebraska, UNITE Nebraska brought 75 young Nebraskan leaders together to develop a vision for the future of the state.

which allowed them to outline a plan to achieve these milestones. At the end of the two-day event, participants broke out into work teams to put their plans into action.

Although UNITE Nebraska was not designated as a CYN event, CYN Coordinator Schnuelle played a significant role in the coordination of the event, and most of the UNITE Nebraska participants were already engaged or became engaged with the CYN network after the event.

In addition to coordination support from Schnuelle and the fourteen-person UNITE planning team, several organizations helped sponsor the event, including the AIM Institute, Cabela's, Full Circle Venue, Pepsi, Union Pacific, the University of Nebraska Rural Initiative and Xpanxion.

#### section 1.7

### THE 2012 CYN SUMMIT

In October 2012, the community of North Platte, Nebraska hosted the third annual CYN Summit. Like the two previous summits, there was a Thursday evening social and a Friday summit. Although CYN abandoned the separate tracks, the summit still offered breakout sessions for personal, professional, community and civic development. Peter Shankman, who has been described by *PRWeek* magazine as “redefining the art of networking,” was the keynote speaker. Shankman spoke about the importance of taking networking beyond the exchange of business cards and developing true working relationships.

While Shankman stressed the importance of real connections, the summit agenda offered the means for developing such connections, through coffee shop discussions and networking breaks. Unlike the previous two summits, the 2012 CYN Summit boasted an official theme of “blowing it up.” This theme conveyed that young Nebraskans are not just going to talk about what they want; they are going to act and help secure a healthy, prosperous future for their respective communities and the state of Nebraska.

Despite a unique social activity and an exciting summit agenda, the 2012 Summit only drew 87 young Nebraskans, 24% of them coming from metropolitan areas and 76% from non-metropolitan areas.



**Photo 4:** The 2012 CYN Summit was held in North Platte, Nebraska and drew 87 young Nebraskans from across the state.

The surprisingly low attendance of young Nebraskans at the 2012 CYN Summit is concerning because, having not seen a decrease in membership numbers, the low attendance of the summit suggests that CYN is either failing to engage new members, current members are becoming less engaged, or a combination of both.

section 1.8

CYN: TODAY

As of February 1, 2013, the CYN network remains free of membership fees, and has 436 members in its contact database, 442 followers on Facebook and 517 followers on Twitter. Of the 436 members in the CYN database, 277 (63.5%) have attended a CYN summit. Of those that have attended a summit, 177 members (63.8%) did not return to attend a summit the following year(s) (CYN Summit Report, 2013). Only eight people, or 2.8% of the network, have attended all three summits (CYN Summit Report, 2013).

Geographically, the 436 CYN members are spread throughout the state of Nebraska. The majority of the CYN network resides in non-metropolitan areas: 81.4% live in non- metropolitan areas while 18.6% live in metropolitan areas (CYN membership report, 2013). Cities that claim more than 5% of the CYN network include Lincoln (12.2%), Grand Island (8.7%), West Point (8%) and North Platte (5.5%) (CYN membership report, 2013). It is not a surprise that three of the four cities with the highest membership bases are those that have hosted a CYN Summit. This suggests that young Nebraskans will engage in the network if the network comes to them. It is not clear, however, why Lincoln, a metropolitan area that has not hosted a CYN Summit, has the highest membership base of a network that is comprised predominately of non-metropolitan residents. A possible explanation for this inconsistency is that Coordinator Schnuelle works out of a Lincoln office and has successfully engaged those with whome she routinely interacts.

Aside from CYN Coordinator Schnuelle, CYN Graduate Assistant Andrea Gebhart (who assists Schnuelle in administrative tasks), and the CYN Steering Committee, the network does not have a formal organizational

Table 1: Attendance at the CYN Summits

	Total CYNers	% Metro	% Non-metro
2010 Summit	131	24.4	75.6
2011 Summit	168	29.2	70.8
2012 Summit	87	24.0	76.0
CYN Network	436	18.6	81.4

*Note.* Although CYN engages young Nebraskans in metropolitan areas, the majority of network members live in non-metropolitan areas. (Metropolitan areas include the Nebraska cities of Omaha and Lincoln and the counties of Cass, Douglas, Sarpy, Saunders, Washington, Lancaster and Seward.)

structure. Although Schnuelle is the coordinator of the network, she does not feel a leadership hierarchy exists within the network (Schnuelle, 2012). Believing the network belongs to its members, Schnuelle takes a participative leadership approach, in which she not only listens, she also values the opinions of network members. Even though, as the coordinator, Schnuelle has the final say in most matters, when a decision regarding the network needs to be made, she emphasizes discussion and inclusiveness in the decision making process, relying primarily on the steering committee for input (Van Wart, 2008, pp. 36-37).

#### section 1.9

### **CYN: TOMORROW**

In late fall of 2012, the University of Nebraska discontinued the Rural Initiative and formed the Rural Futures Institute (RFI), leaving CYN without a parent organization and with limited coordination. At this time, the RFI has yet to name a director, so it is unknown when, or in what capacity, the director will choose to support the CYN network, if at all.

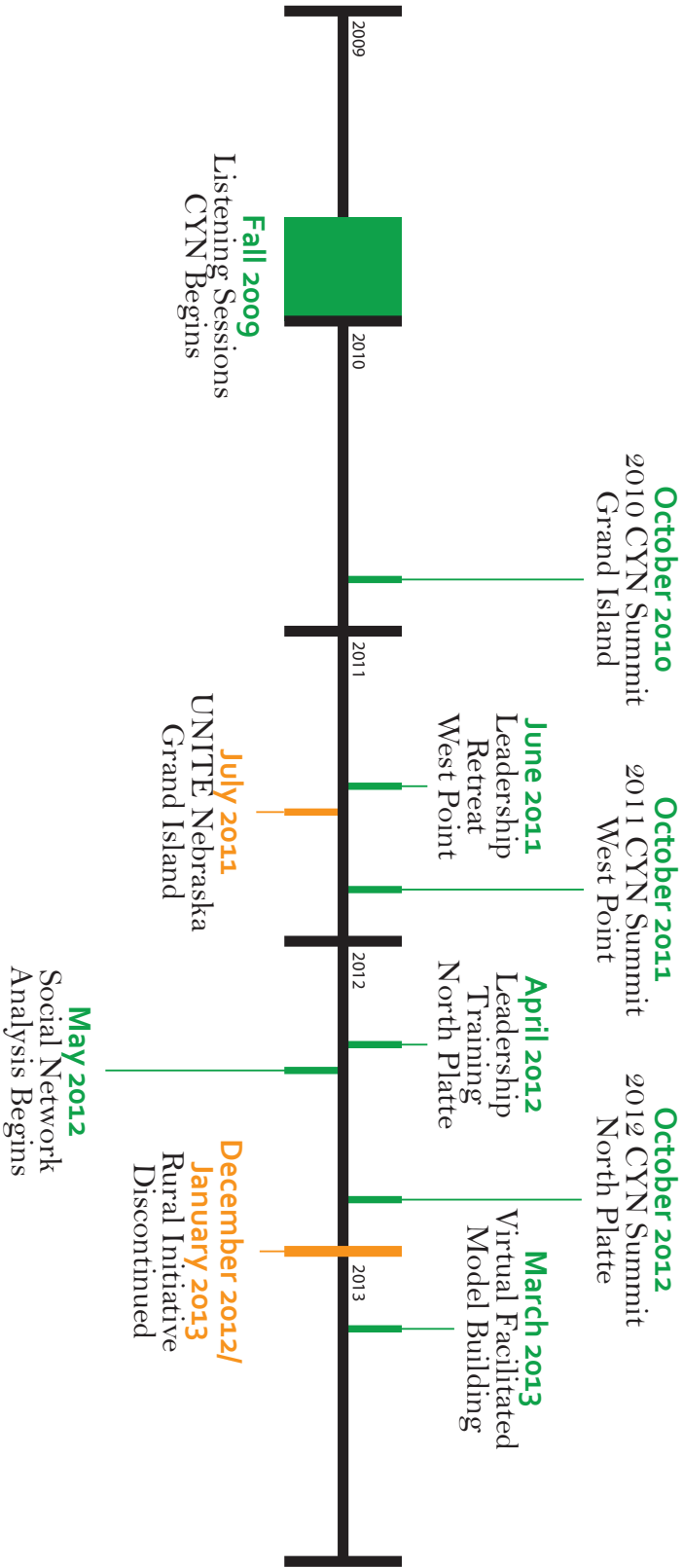
Despite this change, the CYN network is still intact and in good health. However, with limited time allocated toward the coordination of the network, the CYN network risks growing stagnant. Thus, the network needs to determine its next steps so as to remain relevant and meaningful to its members.

Knowing the discontinuation of the Rural Initiative and uncertainty of RFI involvement was in the future, Schnuelle applied for, and received a grant that would allow the network to analyze and assess how to best move the network forward. Specifically, the grant provided funding for three key projects: a social network analysis, facilitation training for members of the network, and a facilitated model building exercise.

The intent of the social network analysis was to help inform CYN of the nature and strength of its network, as well as assist in the development of a long-term vision. The facilitation training happened in April of 2012 and consisted of a two-day, hands-on training to train the CYN Steering Committee in a facilitation method that can be used in the workplace or for community engagement. Lastly, the intent of the facilitated model building exercise was to facilitate CYN conversations about potential organizational structures through which CYN can best serve its members in the future.

In addition to these projects, CYN Graduate Assistant Gebhart concurrently researched topics relevant to virtual communities. Upon the completion of the grant-funded projects, Gebhart synthesized the results of the projects with her research findings and proposed several options for CYN to move forward while keeping the network relevant and beneficial for network members.

Figure 1: CYN over the years



*Note.* Initial conversations in the Fall of 2009 led to the creation of CYN, which has dynamically evolved to fill the various needs of the network. This timeline highlights important CYN milestones.



## chapter two

# LITERATURE REVIEW

### section 2.1

#### VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Community “is any group that has something in common and the potential for acting together” (Taylor-Ide & Taylor, 2002, p. 19). Traditionally, people thought of communities as social units within a shared geographic space. However, the concept of community was radically changed in the late 1990s when the World Wide Web became interactive. Referred to as Web 2.0, the World Wide Web is no longer a series of static webpages; it is now a platform through which people can interact, regardless of geographic location (O’Reilly, 2005). The interactivity of the World Wide Web not only allows for people on opposite sides of the world to interact, almost instantaneously, the interactivity also allows for the existence of virtual communities.

Given the relative newness of the concept, there are still many varying definitions of virtual communities. Some definitions suggest community interactions and activities are purely virtual, or electronically mediated: virtual communities are “groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet” (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 8). Other definitions, however, suggest that interactions and activities are virtual for the most part, but may also be in-person: “a virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks” (Lin, 2007, p. 121).

Although there is not yet a universally accepted definition of virtual communities, one definition stands apart from the rest for being more substantial: a virtual community is “an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms” (Porter, 2004, para. 11). This definition best illustrates the concept of virtual communities for four reasons. First, the definition is more inclusive, allowing community members to be individuals or business partners (Porter, 2004, para. 11). Second, the definition “acknowledges that virtual communities could be completely virtual or only partially virtual” (Porter, 2004, para. 12). Third, the definition embraces non-computer-based technologies (Porter, 2004, para. 13). Finally, the definition conveys a sense of order within the community, either through written policies or social norms (Porter, 2004, para. 14).

Virtual communities are built through social connections that, collectively, comprise a social network, or “a social structure comprised of individuals or

organizations that are connected by one or more specific types of relation” (Lai & Turban, 2008, p. 390). Usually, the relation is a shared interest; however, the relation may be familial, ethnic, religious or a variety of other commonalities. Occasionally, the relation is shared geographic space.

When assessing a virtual community, it is important to consider the “community’s relationship to both geographic and virtual space” because it is possible for virtual communities to share both types of space (Virnoche & Marx, 1997, p. 86). Mary Virnoche and Gary Marx (1997, p. 88) delineate three classifications of virtual communities, each of which share virtual space but vary in shared geographic space. “Virtual communities” encompass people who only share virtual space; these communities rely on technology to interact (Virnoche & Marx, 1997, p. 88). “Virtual extensions” are communities that share virtual space and intermittently share geographic space; these communities still meet online but they may occasionally meet face-to-face to complement or transcend their virtual interactions (Virnoche & Marx, 1997, p. 88). “Community networks” are communities that share both virtual and geographic space; these communities are able to “blend the fluidity of the virtual with the concreteness” of face-to-face interactions (Virnoche & Marx, 1997, p. 88).

Regardless of whether geographic space is shared, the virtual nature of these communities negates issues of physical distance and eases the process of finding and connecting with like-minded individuals (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 1). In other words, virtual communities, through Web 2.0 technologies, facilitate the ability to “share interest without the need to be in the same place, have physical contact or belong to the same ethnic group” (Lin, 2007, p. 121).

In addition to physical location being “irrelevant to participation in virtual communities,” there are several fundamental differences between virtual communities and face-to-face communities (Lin, 2007, p. 121). First, many virtual community members are “invisible,” meaning that aside from website analytics, the presence of many members is unknown because they do not contribute content, they only read content (Lin, 2007, p. 121). Second, the “logistical and social costs” tied to participating and maintaining virtual communities are lower than those of face-to-face communities (Lin, 2007, p. 121). Third, virtual communities do not operate under “real-world” rules because: virtual communities lack physical and social cues; virtual community members can change their identities; and, virtual communities function under different, community-determined social orders (Lin, 2007, p. 121). Fourth, and the most crucial difference between virtual and face-to-face communities, is that virtual communities “require more than just attendance in presence, they require participation” (Coker, 2009, p. 9).

Participation in a virtual community is critical to the success of the community because member-generated content is the true essence of

a virtual community (Jin, Lee & Cheung, 2010, p. 383). Constituting a “building block of the information society,” virtual communities develop their own content, as opposed to a website provider generating content (Ciffolilli, 2003, Abstract). The concept of member-generated content, also referred to as “self-publishing,” is unique to Web 2.0 technologies, including virtual communities (Lai & Turban, 2008, p. 388). With “information exchange” being the most popular reason for joining a virtual community, the content that a virtual community generates is perhaps the most attractive aspect to potential virtual community members (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 10).

Membership in a virtual community varies from community to community. Some communities may have membership dues, while others have no formal membership process. In general, however, a virtual community member is defined as an individual “who participates in a community by either posting or reading messages” (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 8). Currently, there is no standard interaction rate that designates virtual community members as active or passive. But, given that “virtual community sustainability is directly linked with the continued participation of its members,” it is generally understood that a virtual community consists of “persistently interacting members,” with persistency being relevant to the individual community (Coker, 2009, p. 10; Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 7).

## section 2.2

### **CLASSIFYING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES**

#### **A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH**

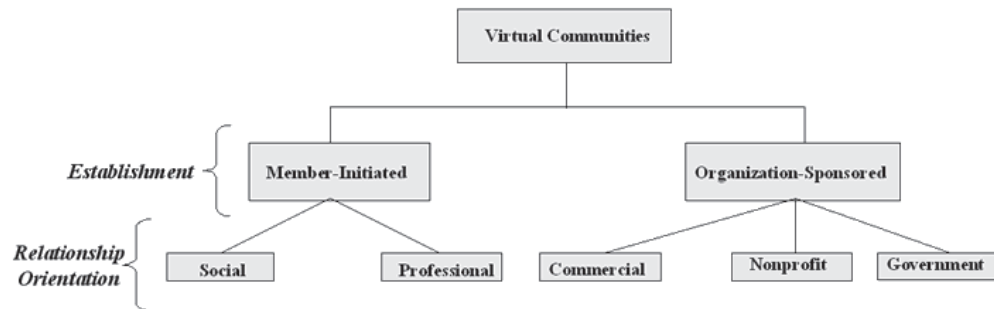
Similar to the lack of an agreed upon definition of virtual communities, “there is no single, widely supported typology of virtual communities” (Porter, 2004, para. 16). However, after extensive research and recognizing that no classification system can cover every aspect or circumstance, Constance Elise Porter (2004), of the University of Notre Dame, proposes a two-tiered typology of virtual communities that establishes a “common ground classification scheme.” (See Figure 2.)

At the first level, a virtual community is designated as “member-initiated” or “organization-sponsored” (Porter, 2004, para. 18). As described by Porter (2004, para. 18), “member-initiated communities are those where the community was established by, and remains managed by, members.” Organization-sponsored communities, on the other hand, are communities “sponsored by either commercial or non-commercial (e.g., government, non-profit) organizations” (Porter, 2004, para. 18).

At the second level, “virtual communities are categorized based on the general relationship orientation of the community,” with relationship orientation referring to the type of relationships fostered between community members (Porter, 2004, para. 19).



**Figure 2: A two-tiered typology of virtual communities**



Reprinted from “A Typology of Virtual Communities: A Multi-Disciplinary Foundation for Future Research,” by C.E. Porter, 2004, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(1). Copyright 2004 by the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication.

Porter’s typology is an improvement over many other typologies in that it encompasses social, professional and commercial virtual communities, while also factoring in non-profit and government involvement (Porter, 2004, para. 20). Porter also contends that her typology includes more common ground because many researchers focus on either member-initiated communities or organization-sponsored communities (Porter, 2004, para. 23). Rather than focusing on one or the other, Porter’s typology includes both, and it is “useful for researchers across many disciplines” (Porter, 2004, para. 23). The relationship orientation level is also broad enough so as to make various disciplinary perspectives applicable (Porter, 2004, para. 24).

While Porter’s typology proves to be more applicable across the wide range of virtual communities, the real benefit of the typology is its creation of “polythetic classes” (Porter, 2004, para. 27). “This means that virtual communities *within* a given class are likely to share common attributes, but no individual community must possess *all* of the attributes commonly associated with that class” (Porter, 2004, para. 27). Through these polythetic classes, which are based on two classification levels (establishment and relationship orientation), different types of virtual communities can be better distinguished from each other and researched further (Porter, 2004, para. 27).

## AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH

Still not widely supported, but commonly cited, is a virtual community taxonomy that describes three types of virtual communities, distinguishable by the characteristics of their founders (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 4). Summarized in Table 2, the three types of virtual communities in this taxonomy are brand-name, affinity-based and purpose-built.

Brand-name virtual communities, often called “dot-com” companies, are large, Internet-based companies. Member interaction is not the principal concern of brand-name communities; instead, their main focus is on the provision of information services and resources (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 5).

Subscription fees, sales and advertisements are typical funding sources for brand-name communities (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 5).

Affinity-based virtual communities focus on the voluntary association and sharing of interests (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 6). Napster, a peer-to-peer music sharing service, is a well-known example of an affinity-based virtual community. Capable of being “open” or “closed” (open meaning that anyone is welcome to join the community), the distribution of costs varies: cost may be assumed by community members through subscription fees, the community can generate funding through advertising, or funds are collected through a combination of strategies (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 6).

Purpose-built virtual communities aim to create public goods (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 7). Typically funded by governments, universities or foundations, purpose-built virtual communities can have vertical or horizontal information assemblages (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 7). Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, is an example of a horizontal assemblage because one member’s contribution does not always directly add to that of another member. On the other hand, Apache, the web server software that played a large role in the development of the World Wide Web, is a vertical assemblage of information because member contributions build from the contributions of other members, resulting in one final product.

This three-fold taxonomy is not as all-encompassing as Porter’s two-tiered typology. However, the taxonomy still provides useful insight into virtual communities. Perhaps the most useful insight is in terms of funding, something which Porter’s typology does not directly address.

Virtual communities vary in operational costs, as well as how they cover their costs. Often, the nature and purpose of the virtual community dictates

**Table 2: A three-fold taxonomy of virtual communities**

Community type	Purpose	Funding Sources	Examples
Brand-name	Providing information services and resources	Subscription fees, sales, and advertisements	AOL
Affinity-based	Voluntary association and sharing of interests	Advertising, Subscription fees (in closed communities), convener-financed	The Well (closed) Napster (open)
Purpose-built	Production of public goods	Governments, universities, foundations, self-financed	Apache Wikipedia

Adapted from “Phantom authority, self-selective recruitment and retention of members in virtual communities: The case of Wikipedia,” by A. Ciffolilli, 2003, *First Monday*, 8(12). Copyright 2003 by First Monday and Andrea Ciffolilli.

the available types of funding. For example, “open content knowledge assemblages, while potentially valuable to the public, may not be appealing to corporations concerned with the bottom line. As a consequence, the financial support of foundations, universities and governments plays a big role in keeping many open content groups afloat” (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 27).

In the development and maintenance of a virtual community, funding may be a significant challenge. To overcome this challenge, it is important to understand the implications of where and how to find appropriate funding sources.

### section 2.3

## ATTRIBUTES OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Regardless of whether a virtual community is social or task-oriented in nature, there are five attributes essential to the characterization of virtual communities (Porter, 2004, para. 26).

1. **Purpose** is central to a virtual community’s function because the purpose is the basis of interaction. (Porter, 2004, para. 28). Without a purpose, the community has no reason to interact, or even exist.
2. **Place** is the structural properties related to a community’s space where interaction occurs (Porter, 2004, para. 29). Depending on the community, a virtual community’s space can be purely virtual or a combination of virtual and geographic (Porter, 2004).
3. **Platform** is the medium, or the technical design, that enables interaction among community members (Porter, 2004, para. 38). The platform dictates the synchronicity of interaction, or whether or not real-time interaction occurs (Porter, 2004, para. 38).
4. **Population interaction structure** is the pattern of member interaction (Porter, 2004, para. 42). Determined by the community’s organizational structure, the population interaction structure refers to type of member-to-member relationships, as well as the frequency and duration of interaction (Porter, 2004, para. 42).
5. **Profit model** refers to the capacity of a virtual community to generate revenue (Porter, 2004, para. 49). The profit model attribute is conceptualized with two levels, revenue generating and non-revenue generating (Porter, 2004, para. 49).

In addition to five essential attributes, there are several additional, perhaps more secondary, attributes to the characterization of virtual communities.

1. **Establishment** refers to the coordination and management of a virtual community. A virtual community can either be member-initiated or organization-sponsored (Porter, 2004, para. 18).
2. **Leadership structure** takes the attribute of establishment further and identifies the type of leadership used throughout the virtual community, if any (Sobrero, 2008, para. 14). The leadership structure helps establish the community and facilitates development of and

collaboration within the community (Sobrero, 2008, para. 16).

3. **Protocol** is the means through which the virtual community governs, or regulates, itself. A virtual community may be guided by formal, written policies or loose, social norms developed by community members (Preece, 2001, p. 349)

Unsurprisingly, attributes are specific to individual communities. While virtual communities may possess similar attributes to others and can be grouped in polythetic classes, no two communities are the same. Thus, in terms of management and sustainability, it is beneficial for virtual community sponsors, managers and members to recognize and understand the attributes of their respective virtual communities (Porter, 2004, para. 54).

#### section 2.4

### CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AS THEY RELATE TO VIRTUAL COMMUNITY ATTRIBUTES

Relative to a virtual community, sustainability is “the ability of the community to maintain membership and participation and promote consistent growth” (Coker, 2009, p. 5). The sustainability of a virtual community is dependent on a variety of things, ranging from “online features,” such as people visiting and interacting through the community’s platform to “offline features,” such as opportunities to meet face-to-face, to less tangible features, such as enhancing the loyalty of community members (Lin, 2007, p. 120). Although the factors related to the sustainability of a virtual community are interrelated and co-dependent in practice, the factors are also closely tied to specific attributes of virtual communities.

#### PURPOSE

##### Access and opportunity for information exchange

Every virtual community has a purpose for existing, and it is the purpose of the virtual community to which all community members relate. Thus, the achievement of the purpose and the degree of satisfaction regarding this achievement is the most fundamental element of virtual community sustainability. Given that participation in a virtual community is characterized by self-selection, that is, members *choose* to participate in the community, participation is driven by motivation. This motivation may be personal, social or ethical in nature, or the motivation may even be related to reputation (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 49).

One of the most cited motivations for joining a virtual community is the opportunity to access and exchange information, which makes “knowledge and information ... a valuable currency or social resource” (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 11). Thus, the sustainability of a virtual community relies on its ability to provide quality, accurate and compelling content (Lin, 2007, p. 123; Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 10). Recall that member-generated content is the true essence of virtual communities (Jin et al., 2010, p. 383). If a

virtual community can encourage and capitalize on its member-generation of content, the community can easily provide content. Achieving *quality* and *accurate* content, however, is achieved through having good standards for the content, whether through formal policies or community norms. The provision of *compelling* content is tied to the variety of interactivity (which is discussed in more detail later).

Also contributing to the overall sustainability of the virtual community, the very nature of member-generated content is self-sustaining: “as more members generate more content, the increased content draws more members” (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 10). These new members then start contributing content that attracts more members, who then contribute additional content, and so the cycle continues.

Given the need for compelling content in a virtual community, there are several strategies to consider in the development and maintenance of a virtual community. For example, “advanced searching capabilities for locating specific threads of interest, ancillary links to non-member-generated material related to the community topic, and the use of ‘experts’ in a particular area to interact with community members” may enhance the opportunities for information exchange (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 41). Considering the presentation of information, in terms of format and accessibility, is also a factor to consider, particularly if community members primarily seek information (Lin, 2007, p. 123).

### **Social motivations**

While the most cited reason for joining a virtual community is for the opportunity to access and exchange information, social motivators are also popular reasons for joining virtual communities (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 12). Some people join virtual communities for the social support the communities provide, while others seek friendship; some researches even suggest “virtual communities may be filling in the social void in conventional communities” (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 39).

Research also indicates that “sense of belonging is a factor peculiar to virtual community, and it is treated as a crucial feature for participation in virtual communities” (Lin, 2007, p. 122). Emotional relationships also constitute a strong social motivation for people to become and remain engaged in a virtual community (Jin et al., 2010, p. 390; Coker, 2009, p. 7). Thus, it can be said that once sense of belonging is adequately obtained, participation should increase, and the sustainability of the community will likely follow (Coker, 2009, p. 9).

As many people join virtual communities for varying social reasons, virtual communities can increase the likelihood of their sustainability if the community platform emphasizes friendship and social support, as well as content generation (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 42).

## **Recreational value**

Another social motivator for participation in virtual communities is the recreation the communities provide (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 18). Entertainment value has been found to be a key factor in influencing users' continued participation in a virtual community, which, in turn, helps sustain the community (Jin et al., 2010, p. 390). Virtual communities that particularly thrive on recreational and entertainment value are gaming communities like World of Warcraft.

Even though online gaming communities best personify how recreational value contributes to sustainability, other virtual communities can easily add entertainment value, albeit minimally, by changing "the outlook of the online space regularly to celebrate festivals such as Christmas or to remind members about special occasions" (Jin et al., 2010, p. 391). Although not a virtual community, the popular search engine Google is well known for regularly changing its online space appearance, primarily for entertainment value (Google, 2013).

## **Fulfillment of needs**

Another theory regarding motivation for participation relates to the "fulfillment of needs" being critical for participation in a virtual community (Coker, 2009, p. 7). In this theory, individuals must possess three characteristics that "motivate them to develop interests," which eventually motivate them to join a community (Coker, 2009, p. 7). The three necessary characteristics are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Coker, 2009, p. 7). Autonomy refers to the will of an individual, and competence refers to the ability to fulfill the desires of one's will (Coker, 2009, p. 7). "Autonomy and competence lead to relatedness, which is the desire to feel connected and related to or identified with others" (Coker, 2009, p. 7). It is the need of relatedness that causes an individual to want to develop relationships with other individuals, and people gravitate to others with similar interests and needs (Coker, 2009, p. 7). Thus, through the fulfillment of these three needs, a community is not only born, but also sustained (Coker, 2009, p. 9).

## **PLACE**

### **Common place**

The second essential attribute of virtual communities is place, or the space where interaction occurs (Porter, 2004, para. 30). Like conventional communities, in order for a virtual community to interact, the community must have common space (Jones, 1997, para. 7). Although a virtual community may occasionally have face-to-face interactions, "a virtual community needs a virtual space" to allow the community members to regularly interact (Jones, 1997, para. 7). The boundaries of the virtual space may be narrow or broad and the space may be public or private. The only requirement of a virtual space is that the space allows for consistent, regular interaction among community members. Chat rooms, for example, are a virtual space that allows virtual communities to interact; however, chat



rooms do not qualify as virtual communities because “they lack a regular basis of participation by their patrons” (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 6). To help ensure sustainability, the virtual space must be easily and consistently accessible to community members.

## **PLATFORM**

### **Usefulness and usability**

Building off the virtual space, the third essential attribute of virtual communities is the platform, or the medium that enables interaction. Chances of sustainability increase when virtual community members find the platform useful and easy to use (Lin, 2007, p. 122). The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) addresses both usefulness and usability while explaining how these two variables help maintain virtual participation, which ultimately leads to sustainability. Proving to be a “parsimonious and robust theoretical framework that has withstood testing across individuals, settings and cultures, as well as time periods,” TAM has “outperformed its theoretical antecedents in explaining and predicting technology acceptance (Wang, Chung, Park, McLaughlin & Fulk, 2011, p. 783).

Among other variables contributing to sustained virtual community participation, TAM most specifically considers perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, as they relate to behavioral intention (Coker, 2009). Perceived usefulness is “the degree to which a user perceives that the use of a technological platform helps accomplish his/her personal goals” (Wang et al., 2011, p. 783). Perceived ease of use is “the degree to which a user perceives that the use of a new technology is free of effort” (Wang et al., 2011, p. 783). Behavioral intention is “a measure of the strength of one’s intention to perform a specified behavior” (Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1989, p. 984). Measuring the strength of the relationships between the two variables and behavioral intention, TAM states, “a member is likely to use a technology if they have they find the technology useful and easy to use” (Coker, 2009, p. 10).

To help ensure success and sustainability, virtual communities should embrace TAM in the development of their platforms. Generally, the main usability issues facing virtual communities are similar to those of other web-based software (Preece, 2001, p. 349). However, there are four usability concepts particularly relevant to a virtual community’s platform: (1) dialogue and social interaction support, (2) information design, (3) navigation, and (4) access (Preece, 2001, pp. 349-350).

In addition to maximizing usability and usefulness, virtual communities should also consider implementing more social features into their platforms so as to, again, better fulfill the motivations of member usage. For example, “the ability to search for all posts by a particular member or access to member profiles could aid in friendship building” (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, para. 42). Moreover, “personal pages can be crucial in strengthening a sense

of trust and identity among community members“ (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 54). Overall, virtual community members are more inclined to maintain their participation in the community if the platform offers features that convey trust and allow personalization (Lin, 2007, p. 120).

## **POPULATION INTERACTION STRUCTURE**

While achievement of the purpose is fundamental to the sustainability of a virtual community, the pattern of interaction, the fourth essential characteristic of virtual communities, is most critical to the sustainability of the community. As previously stated, the fundamental difference between virtual communities and face-to-face communities is that virtual communities “require more than just attendance in presence, they require participation” (Coker, 2009, p. 9). Due to a virtual community’s reliance on participation, particularly in terms of content generation, the participation of the community’s members “is a crucial element to guarantee the community’s survival in the long term” (Coker, 2009, p. 17).

### **Interactivity**

There are several elements that contribute to the pattern of interaction. First, there is the concept of interactivity, which is “the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other” (Jones, 1997, para. 4). While there are varying degrees of interactivity, ranging from two-way, non-interactive to fully interactive, virtual communities require highly interactive communication (Jones, 1997, para. 4). In other words, the interactions of a virtual community must subsequently build off previous interactions. In addition to highly interactive communication, virtual communities also require a “minimum level of interactivity” (Jones, 1997, para. 2). However, there is no standard for the minimal level of interactivity because the “minimum level” is relative to the type and extent of interactions within individual communities.

### **Variety of Interactivity**

The second element contributing to the pattern of interaction is the variety of interactivity (Jones, 1997, para. 6). If there is only one virtual community member, then no interaction can occur; but with two or more community members, there is a possibility of interaction. Club theory contends that smaller groups are better because “crowding” can hinder the development of an association, (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 26). In virtual communities, though, the opposite may be true: “indeed, large can be beautiful and crowding, interpreted as massive participation, may be desirable, especially if heterogeneous” (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 26).

During the development of a virtual community, the community usually first attracts a relatively homogeneous population; but, through adequate pursuit of the community’s purpose (be it information exchange or sociability), a community can attract a more heterogeneous membership (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 23-24). The new, more heterogeneous members will bring a variety of



skills and needs to the community, contribute to the community, and, in turn, help attract an even more heterogeneous membership—this cycle will likely be the same cycle that is maintaining compelling, member-generated content (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 214; Cifolilli, 2003, para. 26). Thus, the more diverse the membership, the more compelling the content becomes and the more sustainable the community grows.

### **Sustained membership**

The third element contributing to the pattern of interaction is sustained membership (Jones, 1997, para. 13). Virtual communities allow their members to interact whenever they have time from wherever they have access to the community's platform. While this convenience is attractive to members, who can participate on their terms, this matter-of-convenience characteristic creates a constantly fluctuating membership base. This constant fluctuation is not detrimental to a virtual community, in fact, it is relatively natural. But, at the same time, for a virtual community to survive, there has to be some degree of sustained membership (Jones, 1997, para. 13).

To be sustainable, a virtual community needs regular interactions of a relatively consistent group of individuals. For example, imagine trying to develop a sense of community in temporary multi-dwelling establishments. In a hotel, the guests come and go frequently and the same people do not consistently interact, which prevents a sense of community from being established. In a college dormitory, however, the residents stay for a longer period of time and are consistently interacting, which leads to the development of a sense of community. Similar to face-to-face communities, the full potential of virtual communities depends on members' commitment to the community and their ongoing participation. Communities that fail to retain regular participants risk becoming "cyber ghost towns" (Jin et al., 2010, p. 383).

### **Opportunity for non-virtual interactions**

The fourth element contributing to the pattern of interaction is the opportunity for non-virtual interactions. Research indicates that it takes virtual communities longer to develop social capital than it does for face-to-face communities (Sobrero, 2008, para. 35). Although not all virtual communities have the ability to meet face-to-face, primarily due to geographic limitations, the satisfaction level of virtual community members will increase if their interactions can extend from the online cyberspace to the offline world (Jin et al., 2010, p. 391). Face-to-face interactions also help increase commitment to the virtual community, further enhancing "social development, group identity, social context, meaning and trust"—all of which enhance member satisfaction and contribute to the sustainability of a virtual community (Sobrero, 2008, para. 36).

## **PROFIT MODEL**

Although a clear attribute of virtual communities, the profit model of a virtual community does not identifiably affect virtual community sustainability because both revenue-generating and non-revenue-generating virtual communities survive and fail. While revenue may make the operations and coordination of a virtual community less stressful, revenue, or lack thereof, does little to affect the sustainability of a virtual community, partially because the operation costs of virtual communities are relatively low (Lin, 2007, p. 121).

## **ESTABLISHMENT / LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE**

### **Coordination failure**

Establishment and leadership are two separate attributes of virtual communities, but because leadership in a virtual community stems from its establishment, factors of sustainability play into both attributes. Coordination failure, or “the difficulty to identify who is going to bear the responsibilities and costs,” is a major concern in terms of a virtual community’s sustainability, with regard to establishment and leadership (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 4). Not only can coordination failure frustrate community members enough that some members leave the community, coordination failure can also lead to ineffectiveness, ultimately negating the need for the community (that is, by not adequately achieving the community’s purpose).

In addition to coordination failure, the type of organizational structure and employed leadership style also contributes to the sustainability of virtual communities. These factors are discussed in greater detail later.

## **PROTOCOL**

### **A sense of order**

Recall that larger may be better, in terms of virtual communities. While being larger enhances content and the variety of interactivity, being large also comes with consequences that can negatively affect the sustainability of the community. Of particular concern is destructive behavior of some virtual community members. As a virtual community grows, members “become more anonymous,” which “opens the door to free-riding” and other destructive behavior, such as virtual graffiti (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 89). Formal policies can help prevent and reprimand such behavior, but because virtual communities have a tendency to be lawless, virtual communities must rely on community norms to self-govern the community (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 90).

In a way, informal norms become the “backbone” of a virtual community because virtual community members have recognized that “if they don’t enforce the norms no one will”; and, when “members enforce the norms with one another ... members begin to own and embrace the norms as their own” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 90). With or without formal policies in

place, a virtual community's reliance on community norms makes the need for sustained membership even greater because these "veteran" members assist in the consistency of community norm enforcement. Due to the need for veteran members' enforcement of norms, sustained membership, again, proves to be a factor of virtual community sustainability.

As illustrated by Table 3, the factors of sustainability can be linked to the eight attributes of virtual communities. While each factor can be directly linked to one specific attribute, the factors are interrelated and co-dependent on the remaining factors and attributes. Note that the purpose attribute (and its four corresponding factors of sustainability) affect every other attribute and factor of sustainability. Thus, for a virtual community to be successful and sustainable, the community must have a clear purpose.

With community members and researchers expressing some concern that "online communities are particularly vulnerable to social dilemmas in which members take from the community but do not give back," the most fundamental concept of virtual community sustainability is continued participation (Preece, 2001, p. 351). For a virtual community to be both successful and sustainable, the community needs "participation past just staying in a community," and the participation must be genuine and relatively frequent (Coker, 2009, p. 18).

## section 2.5

### GROUP FORMATION THEORIES

Communities, both virtual and face-to-face, are constantly changing. A community may be "declining and struggling to exist, growing and struggling to exist, growing and struggling to manage growth, or growing and thriving" (Fettig, 2007, p. 5). Regardless of how a community is changing and where it wants to go in the future, a community must first recognize how it has progressed to its current state.

All communities, consciously or subconsciously, go through phases of development. In assessing progress and determining next steps, it is helpful for a community to recognize and understand "normal development behavior" (Fettig, 2007, p. 51). There are many group development models that communities may turn to; however, virtual communities may find the greatest value in Bruce Tuckman's phases of group development and the online community life cycle.

### TUCKMAN'S PHASES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

One of the most well-known group development models is that of Bruce Tuckman. Developed in 1965, Tuckman's model has four phases: forming, storming, norming and performing (Furst, Reeves, Rosen & Blackburn, 2004, p. 8-10). Tuckman insists that all four phases are necessary, and inevitable, in the development of a group (Fettig, 2007, p. 55). It is also very natural, and

**Table 3: Linking community attributes with factors of sustainability**

		Virtual Community Attributes							
		Purpose	Place	Platform	Pattern of Interaction	Profit Model	Establishment	Leadership	Protocol
Factors of Virtual Community Sustainability	Information exchange	*	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Social motivation	*	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Recreational value	*	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Fulfillment of needs	*	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	Common space	•	*	•	•				•
	Usability	•	•	*					
	Usefulness	•	•	*					
	Interactivity	•	•	•	*				•
	Variety of interactivity	•	•	•	*				
	Sustained membership	•	•	•	*			•	•
	Non-virtual opportunities	•	•		*				
	Organizational structure	•					*	•	•
	Coordination failure	•	•	•	•		*	•	•
	Leadership style	•			•		•	*	•
	Sense of order	•		•	•		•	•	*

Note. \* denotes direct relation; • denotes indirect relation

healthy, for a group to recycle through the phases with each new opportunity and challenge (Fettig, 2007, p. 55). Although Tuckman's theory was developed for face-to-face communities, the model is still applicable to virtual communities (Furst et al., 2004, p. 8-10).

## **Forming**

During the forming phase, people come together to form a group, become acquainted with each other, and start to develop a mission and objectives (Fettig, 2007, p. 52). Establishing a sense of trust within the group is also a large component of this phase (Furst et al., 2004, p. 8).

In a virtual community, the forming stage is challenging because it takes longer to develop high-quality relationships due to the “diminished communication frequency of electronic communications” and the increased potential for “faulty first impressions and erroneous stereotypes” (Furst et al., 2004, p. 8). While face-to-face communities can use visual, audio and social cues to develop relationships, virtual communities must rely on “identifiable actions,” such as “timely information sharing, appropriate response to electronic communication and keeping commitments” to the community (Furst et al., 2004, p. 8). Forming may take more time in a virtual community, but when a sense of trust within the community is established, a virtual community has successfully completed the forming phase (Fettig, 2007, p. 52).

## **Storming**

During the storming phase, group members begin understanding the mission and “come to consensus about the function, rules, guidelines” and norms of the group (Fettig, 2007, p. 53). Also during this stage, individuals evaluate their involvement and commitment to the group; while most members choose to stay involved in the group, some choose to disassociate during this phase (Fettig, 2007, p. 55).

The storming phase also presents challenges for a virtual community. Reaching a consensus is a big part of the storming phase and “electronic communications can exacerbate conflict” through delayed responses and the lack of social cues (Furst et al., 2004, p. 9). Identification of group leadership, whether it is a formal leadership structure or informal leadership, also occurs during the storming phase. While informal leadership tends to dominate virtual communities, the “emergence of an informal or social leader may be an agonizingly slow process,” but also a very critical step (Furst et al., 2004, p. 9). Without identification of a leadership structure, the group may face serious consequences during the performance phase (Furst et al., 2004, p. 9).

## **Norming**

During the norming phase, the remaining members of the group become more comfortable with each other and the expectations of the group (Fettig, 2007, p. 53). The “true basis of future teamwork” begins through reaching “consensus regarding obligations, timetables, and deadlines” (Fettig, 2007, p. 53; Furst et al., 2004, p. 9). Issues of funding often arise during the norming stage, and funding issues have the potential to make the transition to the performing stage either smooth or painful (Fettig, 2007, p. 53).

The challenges of the norming phase in a virtual community stem from the trust, or lack thereof, established in the previous phases (Furst et al., 2004, p. 9). More specifically, the challenges associated with the norming phase involve issues of coordinating work and having a uniform understanding of communication methods, as well as the speed and frequency of communication (Furst et al., 2004, p. 9). Also, individuals can complicate the norming phase if they lack the discipline to follow the community's norms or fulfill their individual commitments (Furst et al., 2004, p. 9).

### **Performing**

During the performing phase, the group actively seeks to fulfill their objectives by engaging in projects (Fettig, 2007, p. 53). Considered the visible phase, the performing phase is where "progress is measured" and the group makes an impact (Fettig, 2007, p. 53). Issues of staffing often come up during the performing phase as the group decides whether to have hired staff or to exist through volunteer efforts (Fettig, 2007, p. 54).

As the activity of the group increases during the performing phase, "maintaining team performance and synergy" is the most evident challenge for virtual communities (Furst et al., 2004, p. 10). If the leadership structure is not clearly identified in the storming phase, group performance may be negatively affected. Without the morale and motivation provided by the leadership, virtual communities may easily lose focus and falter on individual commitments to action (Furst et al., 2004, p. 10). Due to the action-based nature of this phase, the performing phase can be "a period of great satisfaction and/or stress" (Furst et al., 2004, p. 10).

Although not part of the original group development model, Tuckman added a fifth phase to the model in 1977 (Smith, 2005, "A fifth stage," para. 1). The fifth phase is called adjourning.

### **Adjourning**

Implied by its name, the adjourning phase involves the discontinuation of the group (Smith, 2005, "A fifth stage," para. 1). While adjourning may be the result of the group's collective failure, adjourning is meant to convey that the group has run its course, achieved its objectives, and no longer has a definable purpose for existence. "While adjournment may be the logical or appropriate action, it should always be a conscious choice, not the result of apathy or lack of development capacity" (Fettig, 2007, p. 55).

Compared to face-to-face group development, the development of a virtual community is more complex and challenging. However, if a virtual community can overcome the challenges of each phase, the community can thrive (Furst et al., 2004, p. 8-10).



## THE LIFE CYCLE OF A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

As virtual communities have become more and more prevalent, various modern and virtual-based group development models have surfaced.

Generally referred to as online community life cycles, these new models echo the phases set forth in Tuckman's group development model. While there are many deviations of the online community life cycle, "the main idea is that any online community system 'must evolve through the same consistent and logical process'" (Gaspersz, 2012, para. 1).

In an article on the website Mashable, Rob Howard presents a simple but thorough illustration of the life cycle of an online community (see Figure 3). His outlined community life cycle has four phases: on-board, established, mature and mitosis.

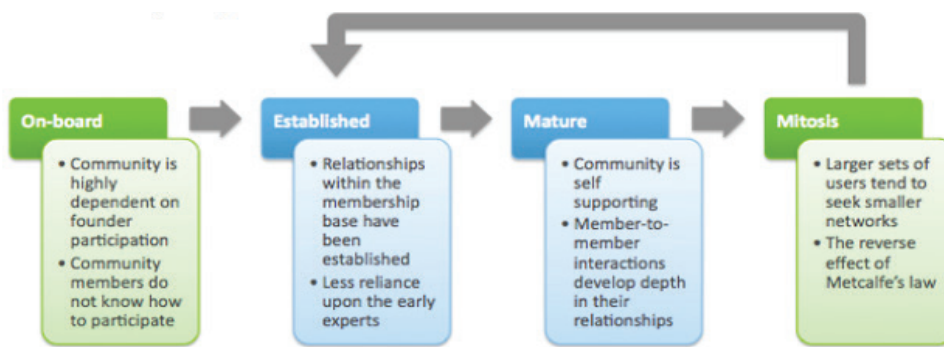
### On-Board

The on-board phase is the "starting point of any community," when an idea has emerged because of a commonly expressed need (Howard, 2010, "On-board"; Gaspersz, 2012, para. 5). As Howard (2010) explains, people begin seeking value, generally provided through content, "which is created by the community's founders." During this phase, a vision is identified and "the technological elements (the platform, the tools, the format, the design, etc.) are selected and gradually incorporated" (Gaspersz, 2012, para. 5).

### Established

During the established phase, the online community is "becoming self-sustaining," as the community members begin "creating and maintaining value within the community" (Howard, 2010, "Established"). As the community's culture and identity continues to develop, community members are taking control of the community; however, there is still some reliance on the founders (Gaspersz, 2012, para. 7; Howard, 2010, "Established"). Also during the established phase, the community can use analytics to better understand member behavior and value (Howard, 2010, "Established").

**Figure 3: The online community life cycle**



Reprinted from "How To: Manage a Sustainable Online Community," by R. Howard, 2010, Mashable.com. Copyright 2010 by Teligent

### **Mature**

Reaching the mature phase, an online community is self-sustaining (Howard, 2010, "Mature"). Community members have established strong relationships and have assumed clear roles within the community (Gaspersz, 2012, para. 8). With community members taking full ownership and responsibility for content, "little to no supervision is required by the founders," who are now no more than "credible participants" (Howard, 2010, "Mature"). While many communities stay and thrive in this stage for a long time, other communities "change direction or add new tools and features to keep members interested" and encourage continued participation (Gaspersz, 2012, para. 8).

### **Mitosis**

Alluding to its biological definition, the mitosis phase involves the splitting of the big community into smaller, more focused communities (Gaspersz, 2012, para. 11). The larger community splits because "core community members become disenfranchised with new participants who don't share the same values" (Howard, 2010, "Mitosis"). Seeking more focus, community members gravitate towards specific topics and relationships (Howard, 2010, "Mitosis"). While the splintering of the larger community seems counterproductive to the development of an online community, successful communities enable mitosis because it best serves the community members (Howard, 2010, "Mitosis"). Each new group will then return to the established phase and repeat the life cycle process (Howard, 2010, "Mitosis").

Similar to Tuckman leaving adjourning out of his initial group development model, many online community life cycle models, including Howard's, omit a fifth stage called death.

### **Death**

In the death stage, an online community dies, "slowly but surely" (Gaspersz, 2012, para. 11). Death is usually caused by the lack of community member engagement (Gaspersz, 2010, para. 11). While death can occur at any time in a community's life cycle, death commonly occurs between maturity and mitosis, when the community decides it no longer needs to exist or it is unwilling to splinter into smaller, more focused communities (Gaspersz, 2012, para. 11).

According to Howard (2010, "Perceiving Value," para. 7), online communities primarily struggle with two things: first, the transition from on-board to established; and second, recognition of the mitosis phase. The first struggle results from "the inability to relinquish some control of the community," while the second struggle comes from "an inability to recognize the natural evolution of the community" (Howard, 2010, "Perceiving Value," para. 7). Mitosis is healthy for a community because the community should respect and reflect the evolution of its members' needs throughout the life cycle (Gaspersz, 2012, para. 11).



In the development of a virtual community, and throughout its life cycle, “no detailed road map exists to show each community the precise way to go” (Taylor-Ide & Taylor, 2002, p. 23). However, through recognizing and embracing the stages of development and online community life cycle, virtual communities are more likely to find the best “next step” for their communities.

## section 2.6

### COMMUNITY AND LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

Virtual communities primarily function as networks, or “structures of interdependence involving multiple organizations or parts thereof, where one unit is not merely the formal subordinate of the others in some larger hierarchical arrangement” (Arganoff & McGuire, 1999, p. 20). More simply, networks are social structures that allow interpersonal interactions of exchange (Arganoff & McGuire, 1999, p. 20). In theory, and even in practice, networks have no central authority as network members, regardless of their recognized expertise, contribute their individual skills, knowledge and resources (Arganoff, & McGuire, 1999, p. 21). This mutual sharing of skills, knowledge, and resources is a critical component of the network’s capacity (Arganoff & McGuire, 1999, p. 28).

While the lack of central authority offers a network the “potential for rapid adaption to changing conditions, flexibility of adjustment, and the capacity for innovation,” the lack of central authority also makes the management of a virtual community challenging and complex because it creates role uncertainty (Arganoff & McGuire, 1999, p. 25; Rhoads, 2010, p. 117). Role uncertainty is particularly dangerous in a virtual community because it leads to coordination failure, which negatively affects the sustainability of the community. In order to overcome role uncertainty, the central tasks of network management becomes arranging networks, rather than managing hierarchies, and maintaining a flexible structure that enhances collaboration (Arganoff & McGuire, 1999, p. 34).

Current research refers to networks and organizational structures in terms of centralization and hierarchy (Ahuja & Carley, 2006, para. 4). “Centralization reflects the extent to which a network or group is organized around its focal point. It is a measure of integration or cohesion of the group” (Ahuja & Carley, 2006, para. 6). Hierarchy is the “degree to which relationships in a network are directly or indirectly reciprocal,” with reciprocal indicating teamwork (Ahuja & Carley, 2006, para. 6). Interestingly, the results of one study suggest that while the authority of a network may strive to be non-hierarchical and decentralized, from a communication standpoint, networks “may still be hierarchical and somewhat centralized” simply due to efficiency (Ahuja & Carley, 2006, para. 9).

## STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS: CENTRALIZATION

The degree of centralization in an organization can be conceptualized through a metaphorical spectrum, with centralized on one end and decentralized on the opposite end. Centralized organizations are easy to recognize because centralization is the traditional approach to organizational structure. Centralization is “a setup in which most power and critical decision making responsibilities are concentrated with a few key leaders” (Kokemuller, 2010, para. 1). In a centralized structure, the key leaders are typically at the top level of the organizational hierarchy (Kokemuller, 2010, para. 1).

Although often portrayed as the old, archaic way of doing things, there are several advantages of using a centralized organizational structure. First, a centralized structure allows for clear, consistent articulation of the vision (Kokemuller, 2010, para. 2). Second, a centralized structure results in fast execution, both in communication and decision making (Kokemuller, 2010, para. 3). Third, the centralization of an organization helps reduce conflict by minimizing dissent and differences in ideas and implementation strategies (Kokemuller, 2010, para. 4). Finally, centralized systems tend to have a greater sense of control and authority because there is a clear structure of hierarchy (Kokemuller, 2010, para. 5).

While there are several benefits of using a centralized organizational structure, if the number of leaders grows too large and layers are added to the hierarchy, the centralized system may become too convoluted to function properly (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 60). In addition, it is possible that many hierarchical layers will appear formidable and discourage participation (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 61).

On the other hand, decentralized organizations have “no clear leader, no hierarchy, and no headquarters” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 19). Also referred to as “open systems,” decentralized organizations distribute authority throughout the organization, giving individuals the power to make decisions (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 20). Despite allowing people to act on their own will, decentralized systems should not be mistaken for anarchy because there are still rules and norms; it is just that the rules and norms are not enforced by one person (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 20). Rather, the system of empowered individuals self-governs the organization. Occasionally, a leader will emerge within the system, but that person has little, if any, power over others. “The best that a person can do to influence people is to lead by example” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, pp. 19-20). Compared to centralized systems, decentralized systems are able to respond more quickly as all individuals in the system have access to knowledge and they are empowered to make use of it (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 50).

In *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, authors Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom (2006) outline various principles of decentralization. Three of these principles are

particularly relevant to virtual communities. First, “an open system doesn’t have central intelligence; the intelligence is spread throughout the system” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, pp. 29-40). This principle applies to virtual communities because it conveys that compelling content rests with the community members, not the community managers; thus confirming the need for member participation and member-generated content. This principle further confirms the importance of having a variety of interactivity, too.

Second, decentralized systems “easily mutate” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 48). In a decentralized organization that allows anyone to become a member, it is nearly an impossible task to quantify membership (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 50). As Brafman and Beckstrom (2006, pp. 50-51) explain, “it’s not that no one’s keeping track” of membership, but when people are free to join or leave a community at any given time, it is like trying to count “how many people are using the Internet.” Although not a virtual community, Alcoholics Anonymous is a classic example of an open system that is constantly changing. While the membership mutates, as people join and leave the support group, the recovery principle remains constant, giving the community a purpose for existing (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, pp. 37, 40).

Third, “put people into an open system and they’ll automatically want to contribute” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 73). In fact, “not only do people contribute, their contributions are remarkably accurate” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 73). Wikipedia, a free online encyclopedia, is the perfect example of genuine and accurate member contributions (see section 3.1 for more details).

As illustrated by Brafman and Beckstrom’s (2006, p. 194) principles, information-driven industries and organizations will naturally gravitate towards the decentralized end of the spectrum because that is where most of the information is located.

While organizations can vary on the spectrum of centralization, it is also possible to encompass both approaches as a hybrid organization. There are two types of hybrid organizations: first there is “a centralized company that decentralizes the customer experience,” and second, there is “a centralized company that decentralizes internal parts of the business” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 164). eBay, a consumer-to-consumer online auction website, is an example of the first type of hybrid (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 164-166). The company has a hierarchical corporate office, however, eBay users can utilize eBay and interact with other members with almost no regard of the corporate office, save for the policies set forth by the company. The second hybrid organization is that which has a chief executive officer (CEO) or director and some degree of hierarchy, but for the most part, the organization is decentralized (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 175). This hybrid is best personified by the automobile industry, in which

a CEO exercises control of an organization, but the assembly line workers are granted ground-level authority to make decisions regarding everyday functions (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 183-189).

Also inherent to the concept of decentralized systems are theories regarding distributed leadership. “Distributed leadership emphasizes sharing of functions through empowerment mechanisms such as participation and delegation” (Van Wart, 2008, p. 85). Demonstrating a radically different perspective of leadership, compared to traditional leadership, distributed leadership theories focus on the roles of the followers, rather than the role of the leader (Van Wart, 2008). With formal leaders minimizing their roles and empowering followers, this concept of shared leadership results in a culture that focuses on the goals of the group (Angelle, 2010, p. 3).

Implementing a “bottom up” approach to leadership through distributed leadership “requires a shift in thinking where leadership is concerned” (Angelle, 2010, p. 3). Due to this need for a shift in thinking, there are three “preconditions that must exist in the organizations if distributed leadership is to be successful” (Angelle, 2010, p. 3). These conditions are (1) “development of a culture...that embodies collaboration, trust, professional learning, and reciprocal accountability”; (2) a “strong consensus regarding the important problems facing the organization”; and (3) “a need for rich expertise” (Angelle, 2010, p. 3). Note that these preconditions are remarkably similar to factors of virtual community sustainability.

## **LEADERSHIP STYLES CONDUCTIVE TO VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES**

Given the complexity of virtual communities, these communities “require different types of leadership styles than those needed for face-to-face” communities, particularly since virtual communities may have limited resources at their disposal (Rhoads, 2010, p. 117). When considering the best way to formally or informally lead a virtual community, several things should be noted. Virtual community leaders should, first and foremost, promote the community’s vision and clearly define expectations of all members, including her or himself (Rhoads, 2010, p. 117). Leaders should also be able to mentor and empathize while still maintaining a sense of authority (Rhoads, 2010, p. 117). “Consistent, organized, and prompt communication” will also prove to be effective tools in leading a virtual community (Rhoads, 2010, p. 117). To best lead a virtual community, one might consider adopting strategies set forth by various leadership styles.

### **Supportive Leadership**

In a virtual community setting, a supportive leadership style is characterized by consideration toward the community’s members, concern for their needs, and the development of a friendly environment (Van Wart, 2008, p. 36). Supportive leadership focuses on people-oriented behaviors, such as consulting, planning and organizing community members, developing members, motivating and, in some cases, managing conflict (Van Wart, 2008,

p. 36). This leadership style is an innate approach for an organization that specifically focuses on its followers (Van Wart, 2008, p. 36). Although this style may be used in any virtual community, the supportive leadership style may be best suited for virtual communities whose purposes revolve around social support and friendship.

### **Participative Leadership**

Participative leadership, in a virtual community, emphasizes “discussion and inclusiveness” in decisions and problem solving (Van Wart, 2008, p. 37). The leader (or leadership team) consults with members and takes their opinions into account, provides suggestions and advice (instead of direction), and encourages a friendly and creative environment (Van Wart, 2008, p. 26). With a strong emphasis on group decision making, this leadership style may be ineffective for action-oriented virtual communities in which the leader(s) may frequently need to make unilateral decisions without consulting the community (Van Wart, 2008, p. 37).

### **Delegative Leadership**

In a virtual community led with a delegative style, community members are empowered to make decisions and are relatively free from daily monitoring (Van Wart, 2008, p. 37). Delegative leadership operates under the motivational assumption that people “seek independence as a form of self-fulfillment” (Van Wart, 2008, p. 37). By distributing authority throughout the community, members become more accountable for the management and survival of the community (Van Wart, 2008, p. 38). Also, through the delegation of authority, time is freed up for the leader(s) to do other activities, “which can include production-people issues, public relations, strategic issues or even personal pursuits” (Van Wart, 2008, p. 37). The delegative leadership style may be most appropriate for virtual communities that take on and complete specific projects.

### **Combined Leadership**

As with non-virtual communities and organizations, sometimes the best suited leadership style is a combination of various leadership styles. “A combined style is the use of two or more styles simultaneously in a single fused style” (Van Wart, 2008, p. 42). One of the most inclusive and well known combined styles is the transformational style (Van Wart, 2008, p. 42). The transformational style is also heavily cited throughout the literature about virtual communities because compared to its application in face-to-face communities, transformational leadership in virtual communities “has more potent influence on outputs” (Rhoads, 2010, p. 117).

### **Transformational Leadership**

“Transformational leadership is about change, innovation, and entrepreneurship” (Tichy & Devanna, 1990, as cited in Van Wart, 2008, p. 74). Thus, leaders that employ the transformational style are “individuals out to create new approaches and imagine new areas to explore; they relate to



people in more intuitive and empathetic ways, seek risk where opportunity and reward are high, and project ideas into images to excite people” (Tichy & Devanna, 1990, as cited in Van Wart, 2008, p. 74). The transformational leadership style combines organizational-oriented behaviors with people-oriented behaviors, emphasizing “environmental scanning, strategic planning, vision articulation, networking, decision making, and managing organizational change” (Van Wart, 2008, p. 76). Transformational leadership also incorporates “devotion, loyalty, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and personalized attention” to generate better performance (Rhoads, 2010, p. 117).

“In transformational settings, the assumption is that change is inevitable, constant, and healthy” (Van Wart, 2008, p. 81). Due to this assumption, transformational leaders must be willing and able to change organizations and people (Van Wart, 2008, p. 74). Change, in terms of transformational leadership, occurs in three successive stages: “the first stage is recognizing the need for revitalization. ... The second stage is creating a new vision. ... The third stage is institutionalizing change” (Van Wart, 2008, p. 74, p. 74). Change is sometimes hard, in terms of implementation and acceptance, so “keeping the motivation of individuals high remains key” to successful transformational leadership (Van Wart, 2008, p. 74).

Transformational leadership is suitable for virtual communities not only because technology is constantly evolving, but also because the membership base of virtual communities regularly fluctuates. Due to these ever-changing circumstances, most virtual communities can benefit from transformational leadership; however, this leadership style might be best for those with targeted age demographics. Virtual communities with targeted age demographics must regularly replenish its community with new, younger members as their current membership base ages. In other words, generational change occurs much more frequently in communities with a specific age demographic; thus, the community must be able to support frequent change, and transformational leadership may be a key to success.

### **Leaderless Leadership**

Leaderless leadership is the epitome of a decentralized system. In a leaderless organization, “a catalyst gets a decentralized organization going and then cedes control to the members” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 92). In stepping away from a leadership role, the catalyst “transfers ownership and responsibility” to the organization, giving the control of the organization to the members (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 93). The leaderless organization then functions through the principles of decentralization.

Despite being “leaderless,” these organizations do not lack leaders. In fact, it is quite the opposite; leaderless organizations sometimes have stronger leadership than organizations with designated leaders (Brafman

& Beckstrom, 2006, p. 20-21). In a leaderless organization, members voluntarily take on leadership roles when issues or projects require their specific strengths, but once the issue is solved or the project is completed, the member reassumes a more general member role, allowing another member to rise for the next issue or project.

Contrary to normal logic, leaderless organizations function best when they are underfunded and everyone participates as a volunteer (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 154). “The moment you introduce property rights into the equation, everything changes:” the decentralized organization becomes centralized as people begin competing for the tangible benefits (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 154). According to leaderless leadership, the more centralized an organization grows; the less collaborative the organization becomes (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 154).



## chapter three

# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

### section 3.1

#### WIKIPEDIA, THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA

Wikipedia is perhaps the most referenced virtual community in current research. Started in January 2001, Wikipedia is a successful spinoff of the now-abandoned Nupedia (“About,” 2013, “Wikipedia history,” para. 1). Although Wikipedia and Nupedia sought to achieve the same goal of creating a free, online encyclopedia, there was a fundamental difference between Wikipedia and Nupedia—and ultimately, it was this difference that led to Nupedia’s failure and Wikipedia’s success. The fundamental difference was that “Nupedia had an elaborate system of peer review and required highly qualified contributors,” while Wikipedia’s system is based on mass public collaboration (“About,” 2013, “Wikipedia history,” para. 1).

While Nupedia’s elaborate system generated quality articles, the elaborate system also resulted in the slow production of articles. In the first year, Nupedia published only 21 articles (“Nupedia,” 2013, para. 1). Using wiki technology to allow mass public collaboration, the articles on Wikipedia are collaboratively written by “anonymous Internet volunteers who write without pay” (“About,” 2013, para. 2). In the first month, Wikipedia published 200 articles, and published 18,000 articles in the first year (“Nupedia,” 2013, para. 1). Due to the overwhelming success of Wikipedia, Nupedia was abandoned; however, as one of the largest reference websites, Wikipedia has accomplished their shared goal of creating a free, online encyclopedia (“About,” 2013, para. 4). Today, Wikipedia has more than 77,000 contributors who have helped publish over 22,000,000 articles in 285 languages (“About,” 2013, para. 4).

Successfully exploiting the concept of mass collaboration to create a public good, Wikipedia makes for an interesting virtual community case study. To best analyze Wikipedia, it helps to explore the basic attributes of its virtual community. (See Table 4 for attribute table.)

#### **Purpose**

Wikipedia has two interrelated purposes: first, to provide information and resources, and second, to provide a public good. With a two-fold purpose and its hundreds of thousands of contributors from around the world collectively creating and editing thousands of articles, Wikipedia has epitomized the self-sustainable nature of member-generated content. Wikipedia’s encouragement of mass collaboration resulted in a member-generated encyclopedia. As word spread about the new online resource, more people began contributing to Wikipedia. Wikipedia’s increasingly diverse content consistently attracts new users, many of whom later contribute to Wikipedia.

**Table 4: The attributes of three virtual communities**

		Wikipedia	NDYP	CYN
Purpose	To provide information and resources	•	•	
	To provide a public good	•		
	To develop statewide relationships			•
Place	Virtual	•		
	Hybrid, virtual and non-virtual		•	•
Platform	Asynchronous	•	•	•
	Synchronous		•	•
Population Interaction Structure	Public network	•		
	Semi-public network		•	•
	Private network			
Profit Model	Revenue generating			
	Non-revenue generating	•	•	•
Establishment	Organization-sponsored	•	•	•
	Member-initiated			
Leadership	Distributed	•		
	Delegative		•	
	Participative			•
Protocol	Written guidelines	•		
	Unwritten community norms	•	•	•

*Note.* Attributes are described in terms of research presented in the paper, not as described by the individual communities.

Not only has Wikipedia established a self-sustainable content generation cycle, Wikipedia has also ensured its sustainability because of its ability to provide quality, accurate and compelling content. Wikipedia ensures the quality and accuracy of its content through its wiki technology, which allows easy editing, and through its community members who act as editors and “ensure that edits are cumulative improvements” (“About,” 2013, para. 5). The content found on Wikipedia is compelling primarily because of the incredibly wide variety of interactivity occurring within Wikipedia’s global community. As Wikipedia explains, “*what* [emphasis added] is contributed

is more important than the expertise or qualification of the contributor,” particularly since the community has a system that ensures quality and accuracy (About, 2013, para. 5). Despite being discredited by some academics as being an unreliable resource, member contributions have proven to be remarkably accurate. “In fact an investigation led by *Nature* magazine found that Wikipedia and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* are almost equally accurate” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 73).

### **Place**

In achieving its purpose, Wikipedia’s common space is virtual and accessible through Wikipedia.org. While Wikipedia’s purpose-driven interactions are entirely virtual, Wikipedia’s contributors occasionally extend their contributor-to-contributor interactions into the real world through Wikipedia Meetups, which are organized by “Wikipedians” around the world (“Meetup,” 2013, para. 1). It is likely that these non-virtual meetings increase the commitment of contributors to Wikipedia, but these meet-ups do not directly contribute to Wikipedia’s two-fold purpose of (1) providing information and resources and (2) providing a public good; therefore, Wikipedia’s place is defined only as virtual.

### **Platform**

Wikipedia operates through wiki technology, which facilitates live collaborations. The collaboration within Wikipedia is both synchronous and asynchronous. Registered Wikipedia contributors experience synchronicity through the user dashboard, while the writing and editing of articles is generally asynchronous.

Regardless of synchronicity, the platform has proven to be a factor of Wikipedia’s success because the platform allows for an evolving encyclopedia: “unlike printed encyclopedias, Wikipedia is continually created and updated, with articles on historic events appearing within minutes, rather than months or years” (“About,” 2013, para. 6). Thus, Wikipedia is successful because of its ability to stay current, which sets it apart from less current resources.

### **Population Interaction Structure**

In terms of population interaction structure, Wikipedia is a “public network” (Porter, 2004, para. 47). Given the transparency and openness of Wikipedia’s platform, it is expected that Wikipedia be classified as a public community. The network structure, however, is determined by the nature of contributor-to-contributor relationships. Social as Wikipedia contributors might be, their interactions are primarily motivated by furthering the collective goal of creating a free, online encyclopedia. Thus, the contributor-to-contributor relationships resemble those of a network, which tend to be “geographically and socially dispersed and focused on the functional benefits of the community” (Porter, 2004, para. 44).

Contributing to Wikipedia's sustainability, the network structure of Wikipedia allows for voluntary participation of incredibly diverse participants, who for a variety of reasons choose to sustain their involvement in the community. Also, due to its network structure, Wikipedia operates through a horizontal assemblage of information (recall from section 2.12 that horizontal assemblage means one member's contribution does not necessarily add to that of another member). The network structure and the horizontal assemblage of information resulted in Wikipedia's unique precedent of dividing labor to encourage knowledge sharing (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 61).

### **Profit Model**

Wikipedia is a non-revenue generating virtual community. However, its sponsor, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., covers Wikipedia's operational costs. Although the profit model attribute has no clear influence on sustainability, the non-revenue generating status of Wikipedia may be a very critical component of Wikipedia's sustainability (see leadership discussion below for elaboration).

### **Establishment**

In 2003, Wikipedia became an organization-sponsored virtual community with the announcement of Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 31). Created to support several online collaborative wiki projects, this non-profit organization generates "revenue through donation and grants, thus ensuring the continued growth of Wikipedia," and enabling Wikipedia to provide a public good, "free of charge and without advertising" (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 31).

Despite being an organization-sponsored community, Wikipedia actually functions more like a member-initiated community because the members, not the sponsor, drive the growth of Wikipedia. While Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., centralizes the issues related to funding, the foundation allows and encourages decentralized functions of the network. As previously mentioned, Wikipedia is the perfect example of genuine and accurate member contributions within a decentralized system.

### **Leadership**

Despite some level of hierarchy, which separates contributors from administrators from developers, the Wikipedia community operates under a distributed leadership approach (Ciffolilli, 2003, para. 46). This is best illustrated through the process of becoming a Wikipedia administrator. Any registered contributor of Wikipedia can become an administrator through the approval of any another administrator; and administrative access is granted to "anyone who has been an active Wikipedian for awhile," or to individuals who are "known and trusted" in the community (Cifolilli, 2003, para. 46).

The distributed leadership approach (paired with its non-revenue generating status) is one of the reasons Wikipedia has been so successful. In fact, some people speculate that “if coveted paid positions were introduced, turf battles and a hierarchical system might result,” and with the resulting centralization of power, Wikipedia could “begin to lose its collaborative environment,” which is the foundation of Wikipedia and its success (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 154).

### **Protocol**

For the most part, Wikipedia contributors abide by informal community norms: “like concerned and thoughtful neighbors, members of the Wikipedia community care enough to contribute regularly and are mindful to keep the content accurate” (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006, p. 74). Taking informal community norms one step farther, the Wikipedia community created five pillars, which are fundamental principles that guide membership contributions. The five pillars are: (1) “Wikipedia is an encyclopedia;” (2) “Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view;” (3) “Wikipedia is free content that anyone can edit, use, modify, and distribute;” (4) “Editors should interact with each other in a respectful and civil manner;” and (5) “Wikipedia does not have firm rules” (“Five Pillars,” 2013).

In addition to these fundamental principles (and somewhat contradicting the fifth principle), the Wikipedia community also developed policies and guidelines. However, these guidelines “are not carved in stone” and their “content and interpretation can evolve over time” (“Five Pillars,” 2013, pillar no. 5). Despite not being strictly enforced, the Wikipedia community found value in the development of policies and guidelines so as to “describe best practice, clarify principles, resolve conflicts, and otherwise further our goal of creating a free, reliable encyclopedia” (“Policies and Guidelines,” 2013, para. 1). It is also worth mentioning that Wikipedia does not require contributors to read or agree to these policies and guidelines before contributing (“About,” 2013, para. 3).

Overall, Wikipedia’s success is a result of having a clear purpose. With a clear purpose the founders were able to develop a place and platform that supported the purpose and emphasized mass public collaboration. Then, through the clear purpose and an appropriate place and platform, community members easily recognized and assumed roles within the community, developing and enforcing loose protocols along the way. Therefore, the clear articulation of its purpose helped Wikipedia develop a strong population interaction structure that facilitated mass public collaboration. Without a clear purpose and its focus on mass public collaboration, Wikipedia may not have been as successful. In fact, if not for Wikipedia’s focus on mass public collaboration, Wikipedia could have been abandoned and the world would be relying on a slow growing Nupedia.

## NORTH DAKOTA YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

North Dakota Young Professionals (NDYP) is a “statewide network dedicated to advancing opportunities for young professionals across North Dakota” (North Dakota Young Professionals, 2013, “What is NDYP”). Comprised primarily of 21 to 40 year olds, the goal of NDYP is to “work collaboratively across North Dakota to support ongoing economic, workforce, and community development in an effort to attract, retain and engage young professionals in the state” (North Dakota Young Professionals Network, 2013, “About”). To accomplish its mission, NDYP acts as a “central resource hub” for young professionals to “access opportunities that allow them to take responsibility for the growth of their community and state through leadership roles” (North Dakota Young Professionals Network, 2013). Started in 2006, NDYP is a program run by the Center for Business and Technology (CBT) in Bismarck, North Dakota; and CBT employee Laurie Morse-Dell serves as the network’s coordinator. CBT is a 501(c)(3) non-profit that helps fulfill technology and business development needs across North Dakota.

A network that primarily interacts through virtual means, NDYP quantifies their membership by the number of subscriptions to its monthly newsletter. As of early March 2013, NDYP had approximately 770 members. However, NDYP’s community is much larger than just their newsletter subscribers because NDYP is also very well connected to the eight locally-based young professional groups across the state, all of which have their own respective membership bases. Despite NDYP’s statewide status, NDYP has no governance over the local young professional groups (Morse-Dell, 2013).

Due to the recent oil boom in North Dakota, NDYP is currently facing a unique challenge. With the oil boom creating thousands of jobs, many people are flocking to North Dakota’s communities; unfortunately, these new residents of the state are not establishing a future life in North Dakota because the oil boom is a temporary opportunity (Morse-Dell, 2013). While the attraction, retention and engagement of these temporary residents is central to NDYP’s strategy to help these families establish a home in North Dakota, NDYP is also trying to find a way for these people to invest in the state of North Dakota and help develop communities for the long-term (Morse-Dell, 2013). In addition to encouraging investment in the state by its new residents, NDYP is also working towards finding solutions to the current shortages in childcare and housing (Morse-Dell, 2013).

As with any other virtual community, a close look at the attributes of NDYP offers useful insight about the network. (See Table 4 for attribute table.)

### Purpose

Driven by its mission to attract, retain and engage young professionals in the state of North Dakota, NDYP’s primary purpose is to share information and



resources. Although part of the group's purpose is social in nature, NDYP Coordinator Morse-Dell explains that in a large, rural state, the statewide network cannot be socially oriented if the network is to be sustainable (Morse-Dell, 2013). In addition, Morse-Dell indicates that currently the local young professional groups focus on social aspects, which allows the statewide NDYP to focus on providing needed information and resources to people and communities (Morse-Dell, 2013).

### **Place**

NDYP primarily uses virtual space to interact. Utilizing social network sites like Facebook and Twitter, as well as more traditional electronic methods like phone calls and e-mails, the NDYP network does not have one designated virtual space. In addition to several virtual spaces, NDYP also provides opportunities for its members to share geographic space through an annual summit and smaller, more sporadic events such as legislative socials (Morse-Dell, 2013). Given the use of both electronic and face-to-face interactions, NDYP's common space is a hybrid of virtual and non-virtual space.

### **Platform**

With multiple virtual spaces, NDYP members interact through a variety of platforms, some of which allow synchronous interactions while others do not. The synchronicity of interactions is determined by whether members are sharing the same virtual space at the same time. Therefore, because it is unlikely that the majority of the network chooses the same platform at the same time, the network's interactions tend to be more asynchronous.

Through the designation of one NDYP virtual space, the frequency of interactions may increase, as well as become more synchronous. However, the asynchronous nature of network interactions is appropriate for NDYP because its purpose is to provide information and resources and not to foster social relationships (which requires frequent and consistent interactions).

### **Population Interaction Structure**

Similar to Wikipedia, but a little more private, NDYP is a semi-public network. While many of NDYP's platforms result in public member-to-member interactions, some of the platforms also allow for private interactions, making NDYP semi-public. Self-described as a network, NDYP also proves to have a network-based population interaction structure because the interactions of the network are "geographically and socially dispersed and focused on the functional benefits of the community" (Porter, 2004, para. 44). While the level of interactivity of NDYP might be less than that of Wikipedia, the NDYP network is still able to maintain a consistent and diverse membership base.

### **Profit Model**

Although NDYP has a membership fee, the network is non-revenue generating. The money collected through membership fees goes directly



back into the network to cover administrative costs and provide member benefits. With no intention of becoming a revenue-generating network, NDYP is considering the use of corporate sponsorships. According to Coordinator Morse-Dell, corporate sponsorships would primarily help NDYP play a larger role in financially supporting its annual Great Plains Young Professionals Summit (Morse-Dell, 2013).

### **Establishment**

Supported by CBT, NDYP is an organization-sponsored network. NDYP is just one of the many programs supported by CBT, and the primary means of support is through the provision of a network coordinator. A CBT employee, NDYP Coordinator Morse-Dell allocates five to ten hours a week to fulfill the administrative demands of the network. The administrative needs include, but are not limited to, website and social media maintenance, information dissemination, communications facilitation within the network, and serving as the liaison between the network and other entities, such as the state government (Morse-Dell, 2013). Given that CBT receives no funding to support NDYP, the network recently implemented a membership fee to help offset the administrative costs of supporting the network.

Aside from the coordinator position, NDYP has no other staff or organizational structure. NDYP does, however, have an evolving operational structure comprised of volunteers. When the network first started, there was a standing board that helped grow and develop the NDYP network. However, because the voluntary time commitment became too much for some members and the board started having meetings “just to have meetings,” NDYP decided to eliminate the standing board and transition to a system of task forces (Morse-Dell, 2013). Similar to the standing board in that the task forces assist in carrying out the network’s agenda, the task forces are centered around specific activities and projects, which makes service on the task forces much more temporary. While this change is relatively recent, the implementation of the task force system appears to be a good transition for the network primarily because of the members’ reduced time commitment.

Between the coordinator and the temporary task forces, the NDYP network falls near the middle of the centralization spectrum. Since most of the communication flows through the coordinator, NDYP is relatively centralized. However, the temporary and ever-evolving task forces pull the network towards decentralization as task force members share leadership functions with Morse-Dell by assuming some of network’s responsibilities.

### **Leadership**

The leadership style that seems most prevalent in the NDYP network is that of delegative leadership. With only five to ten hours allocated per week for the coordination of the network, NDYP Coordinator Morse-Dell does not have time to oversee activities on a daily basis; thus, she relies on empowered network members to help sustain the network and its activities.

The delegative leadership style is perhaps most evident in the coordination of the Great Plains Young Professionals Summit. Rather than Morse-Dell coordinating the event, the eight local young professional groups submit applications in response to a request for proposal to host the summit. Upon selection of the location, the corresponding local young professional group takes the lead in coordinating the summit. Rather than managing the coordination of the summit, Morse-Dell plays more of an advisory role. By delegating summit coordination to the local groups, Morse-Dell's few hours allocated to NDYP remain dedicated to the basic coordination of the network.

In addition to a delegative leadership style, the NDYP network also utilizes techniques similar to those of supportive leadership. As previously mentioned, the NDYP network is closely tied to eight local young professional groups throughout the state of North Dakota; however, NDYP has no authority over these groups. Wanting a mutually beneficial relationship between the local young professional groups and NDYP, supportive leadership (which emphasizes the needs of followers) allows the efforts of the local groups and NDYP to complement each other, rather than work against each other.

### **Protocol**

NDYP currently has no formal written policies. When NDYP had a standing board, the network also operated under a set of by-laws; but when NDYP eliminated its standing board, the network chose to eliminate its by-laws, too. Despite the lack of formal written policies, NDYP follows the community norm that no official NDYP interactions occur without the inclusion of Coordinator Morse-Dell, who either speaks for the network or provides general guidelines on how to interact on behalf of NDYP (Morse-Dell, 2013). This is not to say, however, that the community norm discourages member-to-member interactions. Rather, spontaneous intra-network interactions are welcomed and encouraged, but inter-network interactions should be approached carefully and ideally with the consultation of Morse-Dell because inter-network interactions not only reflect on NDYP, but also its supporting organization, CBT. Thus, the inclusion of the NDYP coordinator, who is also a CBT employee, helps protect the reputations of both NDYP and CBT.

Again, like Wikipedia, NDYP's success is likely due to its clear purpose. Not only is NDYP clear in that the network exists to provide information and resources, NDYP also recognizes that other organizations seek to fulfill social needs. Respecting the delineation in organizational purposes, NDYP adequately reflects its own purpose in the rest of its attributes. Thus, by staying true to its purpose at all levels, NDYP is increasing the likelihood of its sustainability.

## CONNECTING YOUNG NEBRASKANS

Previously discussed in chapter one, CYN is a statewide network designed to connect, empower and retain young Nebraskans. CYN also strives to create a more connected Nebraska through education, empowerment and leadership. Taking a close look at CYN's attributes should help to assess if or how CYN attempts to achieve its goals, as well as the potential sustainability of the network. (See Table 4 for attribute table.)

### Purpose

As conveyed in its mission statement, CYN seeks to connect, empower and retain young Nebraskans. Due to the broad scope of this mission, it is difficult to determine the underlying purpose of the network; i.e., is the network purely social or is the network also trying to provide information and resources? A conversation with Coordinator Schnuelle, however, revealed that the current underlying purpose is the development of statewide relationships, both social and professional (Schnuelle, 2013). In theory, by connecting people across the state of Nebraska, CYN will also be connecting information and resources.

### Place

Similar to NDYP, CYN's common space is a hybrid of virtual and non-virtual space. Using multiple virtual spaces, rather than just one, CYN primarily relies on e-mail communications, as well as interactions on and through the CYN Facebook page. In addition, the annual summit also offers CYN network members the opportunity to share geographic space and interact face-to-face.

### Platform

With multiple places come multiple platforms that vary in synchronicity. However, as is the case with NDYP, the synchronicity of interactions is primarily based on whether members are sharing the same virtual space at the same time. Due to this same-place-at-same-time factor, the majority of CYN's interactions are asynchronous.

As statewide networks, it seems logical that NDYP and CYN would operate similarly. However, that is not an accurate assumption because their purposes are different: NDYP seeks to provide information and resources and CYN seeks to foster relationships. For the sake of both networks, this fundamental difference should be reflected in both their places and platforms. Previously mentioned in the analysis of NDYP, the multi-place and asynchronous nature of network interactions is appropriate for NDYP's purpose of sharing information and resources. On the other hand, the multi-place and asynchronous nature of network interactions may not be ideal for CYN simply because strong and lasting relationship development requires consistent and frequent interaction (Sobrero, 2008, para. 35). To better achieve its purpose of fostering relationships, CYN should consider

designating one virtual space as its primary common space.

### **Population Interaction Structure**

Strikingly similar to NDYP, CYN is a semi-public network. The opportunities for interaction within the CYN network are both public and private, and the member-to-member relationships seek to fulfill CYN's purpose of socially connecting the state, which indicates that CYN's population interaction structure is a network. While CYN maintains a consistent level of diverse members, it is possible that CYN's place and platform may not elicit a high enough level of interactivity to support a socially oriented network.

### **Profit Model**

As a program of the former Rural Initiative, a University of Nebraska program that sought to improve the economy and quality of life in non-metropolitan Nebraska, CYN is a non-revenue generating network. With some funding support from its parent organization, CYN also sought sponsorships to cover the expenses of its annual summit. Additionally, CYN received a grant from the Sherwood Foundation to cover the expenses of facilitation training for steering committee members, a social network analysis of the CYN network, and a facilitated, two-part virtual model building exercise.

### **Establishment**

CYN was started and functions as an organization-sponsored network. The Rural Initiative provided both funding and coordination support for the development and coordination of CYN until the University of Nebraska discontinued the Rural Initiative in December 2012.

Similar to NDYP, the only formal position within the CYN network is that of CYN Coordinator Schnuelle, who was appointed by the director of the Rural Initiative at the conception of the network. As the coordinator (and until the Rural Initiative was discontinued), Schnuelle committed anywhere from 20 to 30 hours per week toward the coordination of the network (Schnuelle, 2013). While a lot CYN's coordination revolves around marketing, such as the development of marketing materials and website and social media maintenance, Schnuelle also plays a large role in growing and developing the network, as well as coordinating the annual CYN summit.

While Schnuelle fills the only formal (and paid) position within the network, CYN also has a steering committee that provides insight and guidance about the future direction of CYN. Comprised of fifteen to twenty network volunteers, the steering committee primarily assists in the growth of the network. There are no steering committee term limits; however, every year Schnuelle reconfirms every steering committee member's interest and commitment to serving on the committee. When members step down, Schnuelle selects new committee members based on (1) candidates' expressed

interest in serving on the committee, (2) maintaining a diverse geographic spread of committee members, and (3) the willingness of an individual to connect CYN with her or his own network (Schnuelle, 2013).

Also, for the coordination of CYN summits, Schnuelle assembles a summit planning team comprised of individuals from the summit's host community. While Schnuelle coordinates the agenda of the annual summit, the summit planning team is in charge of coordinating and implementing the local logistics. As the summit changes location each year, the summit planning committee changes with each summit. With no current plans for a 2013 summit, CYN does not currently have an active summit planning team.

In terms of centralization, CYN is more centralized than not. Most communication flows through Schnuelle, and as the only formal leader of the network, Schnuelle ultimately has the final say in matters. However, Schnuelle tries to maintain some degree of decentralization by sharing her authority with the steering committee and summit planning team. Unfortunately, Schnuelle's attempt to decentralize CYN has not worked because social-oriented networks innately have little authority to distribute throughout the network due to the lack of action-oriented activities.

### **Leadership**

As the only formal leader of CYN, Schnuelle says she tries to take a "servant leadership approach," which is similar to a hybrid of participative and delegative leadership (Schnuelle, 2013). Believing the network exists for and to serve its members, Schnuelle demonstrates participative leadership by rarely making decisions unilaterally. Instead, she seeks the opinions and advice of the steering committee to determine what is best for the network. Due to the socially focused nature of CYN, the participative leadership style is appropriate and seems to be well received within the network.

Elements of delegative leadership are also found within the CYN network, particularly in terms of organizing summit logistics. Although Schnuelle orchestrates the big picture of CYN's annual summit, she delegates the local logistics, which allows her to maintain her regular coordination responsibilities.

### **Protocol**

CYN is different from both Wikipedia and NDYP in terms of protocol. While CYN does have some degree of community norms, CYN has never had written guidelines, formal or informal. CYN has only operated on the basis on personal integrity, and to date, there have been no known issues regarding the misuse or misrepresentation of the network.

Overall, unlike Wikipedia and NDYP, CYN does not have a clear purpose. Unfortunately, because the network's purpose is the foundation upon which the other attributes are built, the lack of a clear purpose may be hindering

the effectiveness and sustainability of the network. But, as detrimental as the unclear purpose may be to CYN, the reestablishment of the purpose will likely solve the potential and current issues of the network's remaining attributes.

It may seem discouraging for CYN's future that the network's foundation is relatively weak, but it is important to consider that the natural evolution of the network may have also contributed to the disconnect between its purpose and the other attributes. While finding the source of this disconnect may prove to be valuable in terms of moving the network forward, rectifying this disconnect is more critical to the future of CYN.

#### section 3.4

### DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of a virtual community is fundamental to the existence of the community. Without a purpose (and its consequential objectives), there is no need for the community. Despite having a clear mission statement of “connect, retain and empower” young Nebraskans, CYN's purpose is vague. Moreover, there are no objectives associated with the mission, and there are no projects or activities that currently seek to fulfill the intent of the mission. Thus, the lack of a clear purpose may be negatively affecting the sustainability of CYN.

Although Coordinator Schnuelle is able to identify the underlying purpose of CYN, which is to better connect the state of Nebraska, it does not appear that the purpose is reflected in CYN's attributes of place and platform. As the preceding comparative analysis and Table 4 illustrate, CYN's place and platform are remarkably similar to those of NDYP. While CYN and NDYP are both statewide networks, the issue with this similarity is that their purposes are clearly different. CYN seeks to foster statewide relationships while NDYP seeks to share information and resources. Given that NDYP's place and platform are appropriate for what NDYP seeks to accomplish, it is likely that CYN's place and platform are flawed.

Also, because CYN's place and platform struggle to support its purpose, the pattern of interactivity within CYN suffers. As with any virtual community, there needs to be a minimum level of interactivity—this minimum level, though, is particularly important for those communities with a social focus. The exact level of interactivity to support virtual communities is not known because it is specific to individual communities. However, because relationship development takes time and consistent interaction, the minimum level of interactivity required to support a social network must be greater than that of a network that seeks to share information and resources. Therefore, CYN's place and platform must elicit a higher level of interactivity than that of NDYP. Currently, it is debatable whether or not CYN's level of interactivity does that.



In addition to maintaining the level of interactivity, the surprisingly low number of network members (87 of 436) attending the 2012 CYN Summit indicates that member engagement and commitment to CYN could be dwindling. In addition to other factors, like the winter weather or Schnuelle's maternity leave, the low attendance of the summit could be attributed, in part, to an unfitting place and platform for the network. If CYN network members were not experiencing need fulfillment, virtually, they may have been hesitant to commit time to a face-to-face opportunity.

Regardless of whether CYN's place and platform affected summit attendance, the low attendance rate may actually indicate something entirely different. If the purpose of CYN is to build statewide relationships, it is possible that the lack of participation and engagement in the network indicates that CYN has accomplished its purpose. Perhaps, members are less active in the network because they believe that CYN has already successfully connected Nebraska, socially and professionally. If this is the case, it may be that CYN has reached the mature stage of the online community life cycle and needs to reflect on the development of the network in order to determine the network's next step. During this reflection, CYN should give serious thought to whether or not entering a state of mitosis is the "natural evolution of the community" because many virtual communities struggle to recognize and respond appropriately to members' changing needs (Howard, 2012, "Perceiving Value," para. 7).

Regardless of whether CYN member engagement indicates an unfitting place and platform or a well-connected Nebraska, it is likely that CYN is in a state of maturity due to the network's age. Started in 2009, the CYN network has, without a doubt, navigated the established stage, and appears to be struggling in its mature stage. In the mature stage, community members have established strong relationships and community members are taking full ownership of the community. It is obvious that strong relationships exist within the network, but the transition to member ownership may be creating some degree of coordination failure, which negatively affects a virtual community.

While some sense of structure exists within the network due to a coordinator position and the formation of a steering committee and summit planning team, Coordinator Schnuelle strives to maintain a non-hierarchical network. She may be filling the only formal position within the network, but her participative leadership style indicates that she is willing to share her authority. Through personal experience, steering committee and summit planning team members know that Schnuelle welcomes and prefers a distributed leadership model; but, this may be unknown among less active network members, leaving them uncertain of their roles and responsibilities within the network. This potential role uncertainty dilemma further confirms CYN's need to reflect on the development of the network. A long,



thorough look at the network will allow CYN to reassess the attributes of its network and adjust them to better serve network members.

In addition to looking closely at the specific attributes of CYN, there is also value in seeing how CYN compares to other virtual communities. Table 4 shows how CYN compares to Wikipedia, one of the most researched virtual communities, and NDYP, a similar statewide virtual community. The table also demonstrates the concept of “form follows function.” The attributes of Wikipedia and NDYP adequately support their respective community’s purpose. CYN does not demonstrate this supportive relationship, particularly in regard to CYN’s place and platform. This is not to say, however, that CYN’s attributes are sub-standard or erroneous. Rather, this suggests that CYN’s unclear purpose has led to the development of attributes that do not support its purpose. Thus, if CYN can better align its attributes to support its purpose (or adjust its purpose so its attributes are supportive), CYN’s effectiveness, success, and sustainability will likely increase.



## chapter four

# SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

### section 4.1

#### BACKGROUND

In an effort to determine the health and strength of the network, CYN engaged Maher & Maher, a management and workforce development consulting firm, to perform a social network analysis on the CYN network. Social network analysis is the mapping and measuring of relationships between people, groups, organizations or “other information/knowledge processing entities” (Liebowitz, 2005, p. 76). A social network analysis has two primary outputs: maps and metrics. The maps help illustrate the connections between network members while the metrics provide a quantitative measure of the connections. Hired as a consultant for CYN, Maher & Maher prepared a final report that included recommendations for both growing and sustaining the CYN network.

### section 4.2

#### METHODS

On May 18, 2012, Maher & Maher sent its social network analysis survey to CYN’s entire contact database, which consisted of 399 members. The survey was open for response until June 8, 2012. During the three weeks of collection, CYN members who had yet to complete the survey were sent several email reminders encouraging the completion of the survey.

Maher & Maher developed the survey with significant input from CYN Coordinator Schnuelle, CYN Graduate Assistant Gebhart, and CYN Steering Committee member Matt Rezac. The survey consisted of two sections: “(1) a section about respondent characteristics and groups/areas of interest; and (2) a section about relationships among respondents” (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 2). (See Appendix B for the complete list of the questions posed in the survey.)

When answering questions from the second section regarding relationships among members, survey respondents were asked to select the names of CYN members they knew and who they felt met one or more of the following five relationship criteria: motivation, leadership, awareness, influence, and opportunity (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 3). If survey respondents felt an individual was missing from the list, regardless of whether the individual was in the CYN network, respondents were able to add names to their survey.

Using social network analysis software provided by Orgnet, LLC, Maher & Maher used the results of the survey to generate maps and metrics of the

CYN network. The generation of the maps was relatively straightforward. Maher & Maher illustrated a connection between two individuals by connecting two nodes on the map with a line. The length of the line signifies the “tightness” of the connection based on network metrics (Sullivan, 2013). On the other hand, the calculation of the metrics was based on the responses of the survey’s relational questions. Broadly put, Maher & Maher’s metrics “are ranked measures of how often individuals were ‘pointed’ to by survey takers...and where they ‘rank’ in relation to one another” (Sullivan, 2013). Individuals that were frequently selected in responses scored “high,” while individuals selected significantly less scored “lower” (Sullivan, 2013).

In addition to comprehensive network analysis, Maher & Maher also generated sub-network maps and metrics using the responses from the first section of the survey, which was primarily demographic information. Between the comprehensive network and sub-network analyses, Maher & Maher was able to provide specific and detailed insight about the CYN network.

section 4.3

FINDINGS

Survey Response and Completion Rate

In the three weeks that the survey was open for responses, only 70 people of the 399 in the CYN database completed the survey in full (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 5). Fifty-two CYN members started the survey, but did not complete it, while another 233 people did not even start the survey (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 5). The remaining 44 people did not receive the survey,

Table 5: CYN social network analysis survey responses

	No. of network members	% of network members
Original sample size	399	
Bounce-backs*	44	11%
Fully complete	70	20%
Incomplete**	52	15%
Not started	233	66%
Response rate (complete and incomplete responses)	132	34%
Completion response rate (complete responses only)	70	20%

Note. \* “Bounce-backs” are emails that were returned as incorrect or otherwise undeliverable. Bounce-backs are excluded from response rate calculations.  
\*\* “Incomplete” signifies individuals who at least opened the survey but did not complete it.  
Adapted from “Connecting Young Nebraskans social network mapping report,” by Maher & Maher, 2012.

as evidenced by emails sent to them “bouncing back” because of incorrect or undeliverable email addresses (these bounce-backs were excluded from response rate calculations) (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 5). The total of 122 survey respondents resulted in a 34% survey response rate (Maher & Maher, 2012). However, only 70 people completed the survey in its entirety, resulting in a 20% survey completion rate (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 5).

The 20% survey completion rate was both lower than expected and lower than desired. However, with a network of nearly 400 people, there “is no set standard for the level of response one can reasonably expect in social network mapping surveys” (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 5). Instead, the network under analysis must rely on the tendency for the most involved and invested members of the network to complete the survey (Maher & Maher, 2012, pp. 5-6). Maher & Maher (2012, pp. 5-6) attribute the low response rate to the large size of the network, the geographic dispersion of the network, and the “looseness” of the network.

Maher & Maher speculates that the large size of the network contributed to the low response rate because the size of the network directly dictated the design of the survey and, therefore, its functionality and the ease of its completion by respondents (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 6). To take the survey, respondents first had to identify the individuals they knew—from a list of 399 people (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 6). Scrolling through a list of 399 people is cumbersome and daunting; it is also time consuming (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 6). Thus, the size of the network was a likely deterrent of survey completion; however, there was no way around this deterrent because “in order to obtain accurate and actionable data, the survey needed to include the names of all CYN members” (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 6).

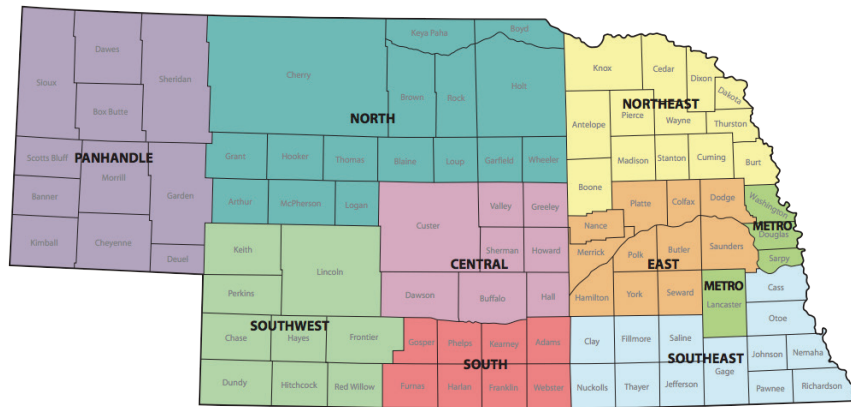
The second possible explanation for the low completion rate of the survey is the geographic dispersion of the CYN network. After identifying the existence of membership “hubs” in the central and northeast regions of the state, “from which the majority of survey respondents originate,” Maher & Maher (2012, p. 6) speculate that members in other regions of Nebraska with fewer members feel less connected to the central and northeastern hubs and were simply less inclined to complete the survey.

Maher & Maher (2012, p. 6-7) also attribute the low completion rate to the “looseness” of the CYN network. While definitely characteristic of the casual culture of CYN, this looseness might have minimized “members’ sense of urgency about completing” the survey (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 7).

### **Characteristics of Respondents**

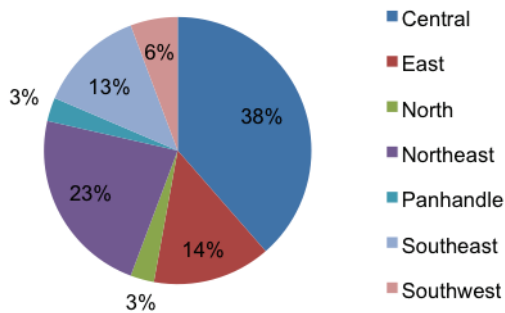
As previously mentioned, the first section of the social analysis survey was about respondent characteristics and areas of interest. One of characteristic questions asked, “in what area of the state do you primarily live, work, interact and play?” (Maher & Maher, 2012). Respondents were able to choose

**Figure 4: Nebraska regions used in survey**



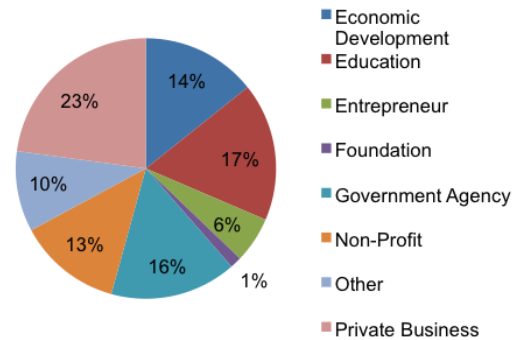
*Note.* “Metro” counties are considered part of the eastern region. Reprinted from “2011 Transfer of Wealth Study Summary Report,” by The Nebraska Community Foundation, 2011. Copyright 2011 by The Nebraska Community Foundation.

**Figure 5: Respondents by region**



Adapted from “Connecting Young Nebraskans social network mapping report,” by Maher & Maher, 2012.

**Figure 6: Respondents by employment area**



Adapted from “Connecting Young Nebraskans social network mapping report,” by Maher & Maher, 2012.

**Table 6: Respondents by age range**

Age range	No. of respondents	Percent of responses
Under 21	1	1%
21-25	3	4%
26-30	23	33%
31-35	23	33%
36-40	9	13%
41-45	1	1%
45 and over	4	6%
Total	64	100%

Adapted from “Connecting Young Nebraskans social network mapping report,” by Maher & Maher, 2012.

**Table 7: Respondents’ areas of interest**

Interest area	No. of respondents	Percent of responses
Professional	57	81%
Leadership	57	81%
Community	55	79%
Personal	47	67%
Civic	33	47%
Other	13	19%
Total	262	

*Note.* Each respondent could select more than one interest area. Adapted from “Connecting Young Nebraskans social network mapping report,” by Maher & Maher, 2012.

from the regions indicated in Figure 4. As illustrated by Figure 5, survey responses were concentrated in the central and eastern regions of Nebraska. The survey results also suggest that southern, panhandle, northern and southwestern regions of Nebraska are underrepresented in the CYN network (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 8).

While the CYN network does not appear to be evenly distributed geographically, the social network analysis survey shows a diverse and balanced spread of respondents' fields of employment (see Figure 6). Maher & Maher (2012, p. 7) found the high response rates from individuals in the private business and economic development fields particularly noteworthy because "they can be more difficult constituencies to engage, and their strong levels of response suggest a real investment in the CYN network."

Unsurprisingly, given CYN's target demographic, the majority of survey responses fell in the 26-40 age range, with most between 26 and 30 (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 10). Of CYN's target demographic, it appears that the 21 to 25 range is the most under-represented in the survey (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 10). (See Table 6 for age distribution.)

The survey also asked respondents to indicate which types of groups they would like to be more involved in and/or active with; survey respondents noted that most of their interest is in the realms of professional, leadership, community and personal. (See Table 7 for interest areas.)

#### section 4.4

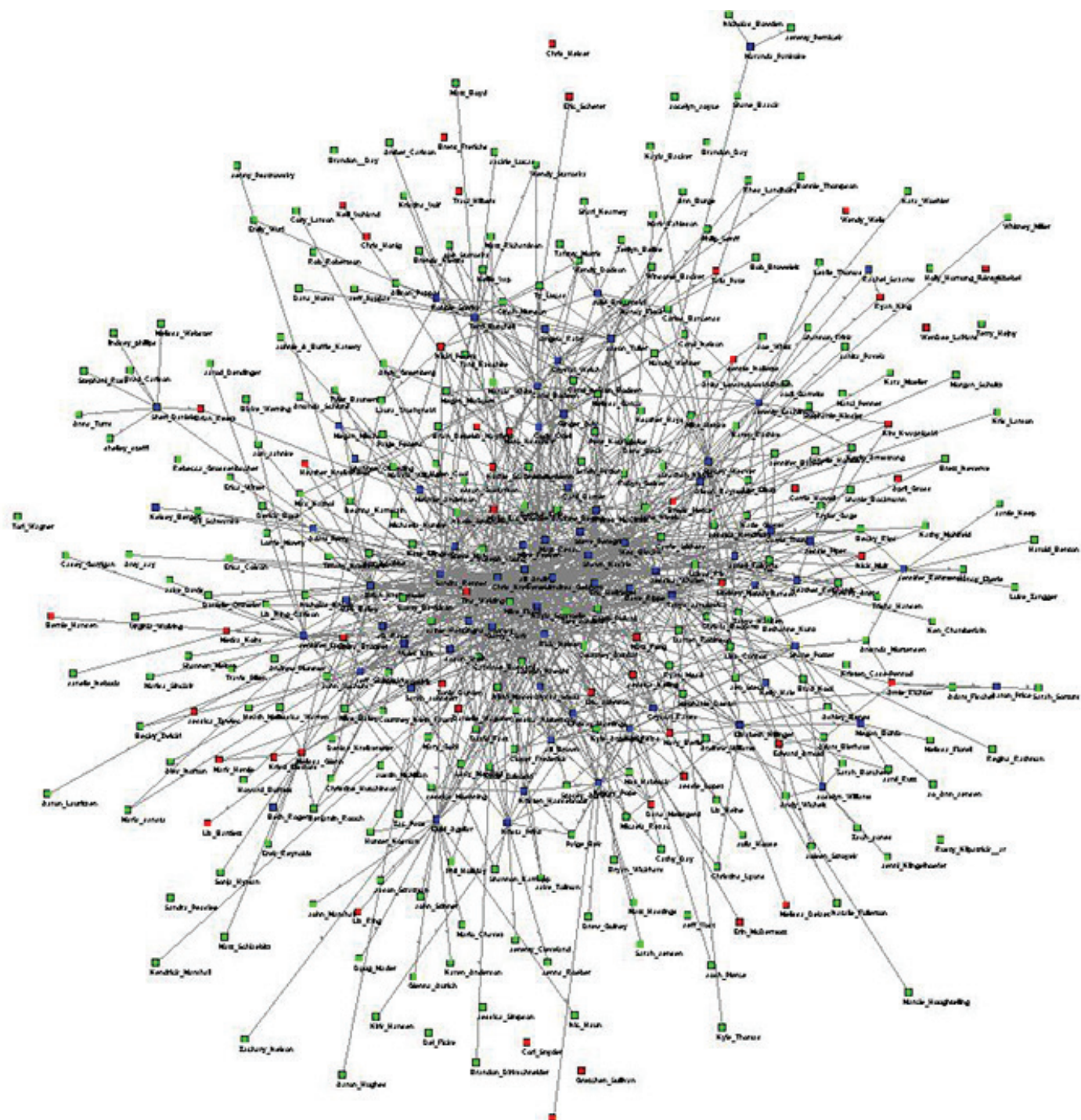
### NETWORK ANALYSES

The first map Maher & Maher generated was the total collaboration map (Figure 7), which "indicates the network of both responders and non-responders; in other words, all 399 individuals to whom the survey was emailed and whose names therefore appeared as choices for respondents to consider." (Maher & Maher, 2013, p. 11). For the total collaboration map, the "the blue nodes indicate individuals who completed the survey; red nodes are those who opened the survey but did not complete it; and the green nodes represent those who did not open the survey" (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 11). Additionally, "each line in the map represents a person pointing, either TO or FROM, with arrows on the lines indicating the direction of the pointing" (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 12).

According to Maher & Maher consultant Gretchen Sullivan (2013), "the more closely two people are connected on the map, the more tightly they are connected in terms of how highly they scored on the metrics (relational questions) in relation to one another." For example, "individuals that appear way out on the periphery of the map were not frequently mentioned or highly scored by other survey respondents, while those at the dense center were...highly ranked in the metrics" (Sullivan, 2013).



Figure 7: Total collaboration network: all survey recipients



Note. Blue nodes represent CYN members who completed the survey; red nodes represent members who opened the survey but did not complete it; and the green nodes represent those members who did not open the survey. (Resolution of the map was intentionally decreased to respect the privacy of network members whose names appear on the map.) Reprinted from "Connecting Young Nebraskans social network mapping report," by Maher & Maher, 2012. Copyright 2012 by Maher & Maher.

When looking at Figure 7, it is important to note that the distribution of nodes does not correspond with the geographic dispersion of the network members (that is, the names on the left of the map are not necessarily those individuals living in western Nebraska). Rather, people's names "fall in terms of the strength of their various relationships to one another, as well as where they are located within the various networks" (i.e., employment area, interest area) (Sullivan, 2013).

Using the total collaboration network map, Maher & Maher offer three key observations about the CYN network as a whole. First, almost all the nodes at the center of the map are blue—this is because these members both pointed to others and had others pointing to them, on at least one of the five relationship-based questions (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 12). With the green nodes representing network members who did not open the survey, the green nodes appear at the edges of the network map because these individuals did not point to anyone else (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 12). The red nodes fall somewhere in between because while these network members opened the survey, they most likely did not proceed to point to other members" (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 12).

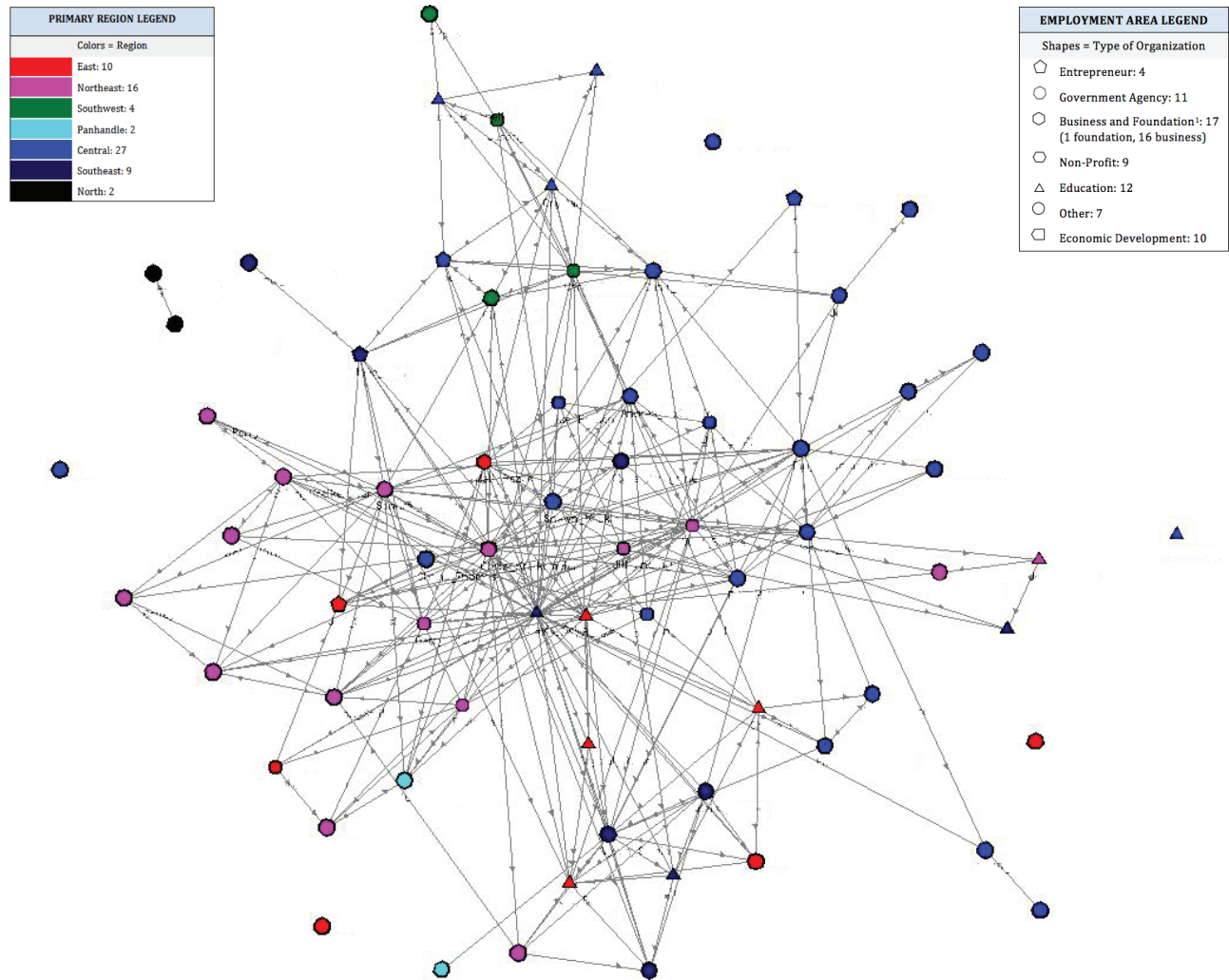
Second, the center of the CYN network is dense, which indicates "a number of significant connections already exist" (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 12). Maher & Maher (2012, p. 12) suggest that the "mid-level of the map, working outwards from the center, contains a number of connections that could be knitted together into issue-based and/or regionally-based networks."

Third, while the red and green nodes indicate limited and no participation in the survey, respectively, the presence of the nodes is a "potentially positive attribute" (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 12). If the CYN network can effectively engage the members that these red and green nodes represent, there is potential for bringing "new ideas into the active network" (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 12).

After analyzing the total network collaboration map, Maher & Maher generated a respondent collaboration map (Figure 8). The respondent collaboration map illustrates that the "network of responders is reasonably tight" and dominated by those from the northeast and central regions of the state (color coded pink and royal blue, respectively) (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 15). From this map, Maher & Maher (2012, p. 15) offers two findings. First, "folks from the central region tend to be more connected to those in other regions than are individuals from the northeast." Second, the northeast region has stronger connections within their regions" (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 15).

Maher & Maher also used the results of the social network analysis survey to generate other sub-network maps analyzing employment disciplines,

**Figure 8: Total collaboration network: respondents only**



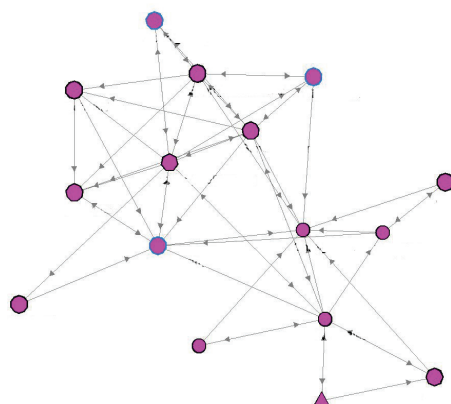
*Note.* This map illustrates the total collaboration network for only those that completed the survey. (Names have been removed to respect the privacy of network members.) Reprinted from “Connecting Young Nebraskans social network mapping report,” by Maher & Maher, 2012. Copyright 2012 by Maher & Maher.

regional representation, and network relationships (based on the five relationship criteria).

After analyzing the various employment discipline sub-network maps and metrics, Maher & Maher points out two notable findings. First, members of the business sub-network are not well connected to one another. They are, however, significantly well connected to members of the economic development sub-network (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 36). Second, the education sub-network is very loose and quite sparse, and Schnuelle is the only link across regions. When the business and education sub-networks are combined, the network becomes denser and well knit (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 37).

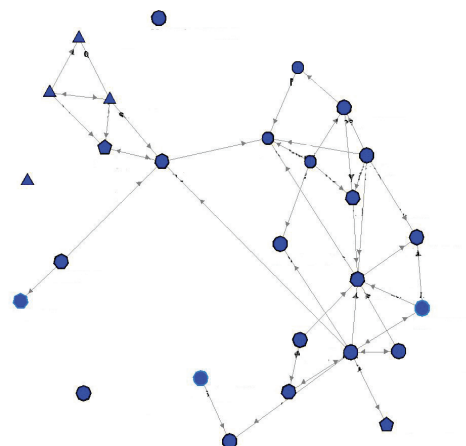


**Figure 9: Northeast region sub-network**



*Note.* Names have been removed to respect the privacy of network members. Reprinted from “Connecting Young Nebraskans social network mapping report,” by Maher & Maher, 2012. Copyright 2012 by Maher & Maher.

**Figure 10: Central region sub-network**



*Note.* Names have been removed to respect the privacy of network members. Reprinted from “Connecting Young Nebraskans social network mapping report,” by Maher & Maher, 2012. Copyright 2012 by Maher & Maher.

Then, when assessing the regional sub-networks, Maher & Maher identifies two trends. First, the survey indicates that the central and northeast regions are the densest regions in the network, but the northeast network is “far more integrated, with a number of individuals serving as connectors among smaller sub-networks, while the central region is almost two separate networks, with only a few individuals serving as connectors” (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 37). Figures 9 and 10 illustrate this finding. Second, if not for Schnuelle, there would be almost no connections between the east and southeast sub-networks (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 37).

In the various relational maps (which were generated using the responses from the second section regarding relationships among members), Maher & Maher noticed three key trends. First, most of those who ranked high in the relational metrics completed the survey; however, there were some individuals who did not complete the survey that still ranked highly in the metrics (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 36). Second, there was a group of individuals who consistently ranked high in the various metrics. Kayla Schnuelle, who ranked at top in almost all instances, is one of these individuals (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 36). Third, when Schnuelle and these high-ranking individuals are removed from the total collaboration network map, the CYN network “becomes significantly less dense and less well knit, though still viable” (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 36).

#### section 4.5

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CYN

Prefacing specific recommendations for the CYN network, Maher & Maher first discuss the relative health of the network and potential development

opportunities. Healthy networks “are typically diverse, with members that are well-connected to one another and actively engaged in the network’s mission and activities” (Maher & Maher, 2012, pp. 37-38). Considering the network to be in good health, Maher & Maher (2012, p. 37) believes “there appears to be great potential to develop the network further” by growing the regional sub-networks and then better connecting the regional sub-networks into a more cohesive state network. In addition, the survey illustrates “respondents are clearly passionate about professional, leadership and community issues,” interests that CYN can seek to serve, but also pursue to better engage its members (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 38).

Maher & Maher (2012, p. 48) also addressed the group of individuals who consistently rank high in the various metrics: “it appears that, for the most part, CYN would still have a viable (albeit much less robust and well-connected) network absent these individuals.” However, the network analysis also suggests some degree of over-reliance on these individuals, leading Maher & Maher (2012, p. 37) to advise CYN to tap into the “second level” of individuals who also consistently ranked highly in network metrics.

Growing more specific in recommendation, Maher & Maher presents four ways to strengthen the network.

### **1. Enhance investment and engagement in the network**

Contributing to the low survey completion rate, Maher & Maher (2012, p. 39) found it “striking” that “more than half of CYN’s membership did not even open the survey.” More speculation than anything, Maher & Maher (2012, p. 39) suggests that because CYN is a loose network with expansive goals, which encompass a wide range of concerns, the broad scope of the network may be limiting investment and engagement in the network. Perhaps through better articulation of common ground, CYN can “enhance the integration, cohesion, energy and investment of the network” (Maher & Maher, 2012, p. 39).

Also, to enhance investment and engagement, Maher & Maher (2012, p. 39) suggests increasing the opportunities for CYN members to interact in person, as well as bringing members together around specific projects with concrete goals. Maher & Maher (2012, p. 39-40) contends that by offering specific projects for members to get involved in, and take ownership of, CYN can boost its relevance to young Nebraskans, offer members a “what’s in it for me?” motivation and demonstrate tangible results of the network.

### **2. Diversify and connect regional representation in the network**

Based on the regional sub-network analyses, Maher & Maher (2012, p. 40) recommends two development strategies: first, CYN should focus on the building of regional sub-networks, and second, CYN should “undertake an effort to then knit regional sub-networks together.” Seeing some degree of interest commonality in the central and northeast regions, Maher &

Maier (2012, p. 39) proposes that regional sub-networks will naturally come together over regional interests and issues. Also by “regionalizing” its efforts, CYN leaders can better focus on knitting the regional sub-networks together and energizing the network as a whole (Maier & Maier, 2012, p. 40).

### **3. Diversify and connect network employment disciplines**

While the CYN network offers a well-balanced variety of professions, the network analyses indicated that “none of the individual employment area communities are particularly well-integrated in terms of members’ connections to one another” (Maier & Maier, 2012, p. 40). Thus, CYN can play a role in facilitating connections between members of similar employment disciplines, particularly connections across regions (Maier & Maier, 2012, p. 40). To help accomplish this, Maier & Maier (2012, p. 41) recommends leveraging economic development representatives because they are typically important connectors, given their diverse areas of concern. Once again, Maier & Maier (2012, p. 41) uses the concept of strengthening different regional sub-networks to “better knit the entire statewide network.”

### **4. Target the 21-25 and 36-40 age brackets**

Referring back to CYN’s target demographic, Maier & Maier (2012, p. 41) recommends recruiting individuals falling in the 21-25 and 36-40 age brackets because individuals of the former group bring energy, innovation and new ideas, while individuals of the latter group bring experience, credibility and established contacts.

#### section 4.6

### **IMPLICATIONS**

The social network analysis conducted by Maier & Maier offers great insight about the nature and strength of the CYN network. Perhaps most notable is Maier & Maier’s assessment of the network’s health. Not only did the social network analysis find the CYN network to be in good health, it also illustrates that even if key community members were to disassociate, the network would still be viable. As the CYN network sits at a crossroads, needing to choose its future direction, it is reassuring to know that the network is healthy. However, the health of the network makes the determination of CYN’s future no less pressing, and various parts of Maier & Maier’s analysis illuminate some practical implications.

In the final social network analysis report, Maier & Maier (2012, p. 39) states that CYN has “expansive goals and purposes that encompass a wide range of concerns.” It seems that in a subtle way, Maier & Maier is questioning if CYN has bitten off more than it can chew. Trying to help and not criticize, Maier & Maier suggests that, while still keeping its broad goals, CYN should identify and pursue objective goals and projects that members can better rally around.

While Maher & Maher provides additional recommendations on how to make do with the current mission and goals, it may be worthwhile for CYN to revisit its purpose and better articulate it, simply because the purpose is fundamental to the existence of a virtual community. The purpose of a virtual community is the one interest that all of the community members share; thus, if the purpose is not clear, the virtual community will suffer.

Building off the concern surrounding the articulation of CYN's purpose, Maher & Maher also makes a point that the "looseness" of the network may be detrimental to member engagement. Maher & Maher mentions that the loose quality of the network may be resulting in loose or weak connections within the network, rather than close or strong connections. This may be true; however, the looseness may have two additional consequences. First, the loose quality may convey to members that interaction need not be frequent—but according to the factors of virtual community sustainability, there needs to be some minimum level of ongoing interactivity (Jones, 1997, para. 2). What that minimum level is for CYN is not known, but perhaps it is worth exploring. Second, the loose quality may also elicit some confusion as to how the network functions, particularly in terms of organizational structure. This confusion, if not carefully monitored, may lead to some degree of coordination failure, which negatively affects the sustainability of a virtual community. Although CYN self-describes itself as a loose network, the loose quality may be creating a sense of disorder among current and potential members; clarification of what "loose" means may be advantageous for CYN's long-term success.

Again trying to increase CYN's chances of long-term success, Maher & Maher also indicates the development of sub-networks, regional or otherwise, might be a worthwhile pursuit for CYN. This recommendation is reminiscent of the online community life cycle when a community moves from mature to mitosis, which is when the large community splits into two or more smaller, more focused communities. Seemingly similar, there is a fundamental difference between Maher & Maher's recommendation and the online community life cycle: Maher & Maher's recommendation does not advise the development of independent sub-networks. Rather, Maher & Maher emphasizes the development of sub-networks in an attempt to strengthen the larger, complete CYN network. In other words, Maher & Maher suggests that CYN progress to a phase of pseudo-mitosis, where sub-networks will collectively and synergistically form the full CYN network.

While Maher & Maher's recommendation may indicate the network is ready to enter pseudo-mitosis, the question is whether or not the network actually is ready to progress into mitosis. Recall that during maturity, virtual community members take full ownership of the community as the community's founders cede control. The social network analysis does not indicate whether or not members take full ownership of the community, but given the unexpectedly low survey response rate, it can reasonably



be assumed that CYN's membership engagement is limited and the members have not yet taken full ownership. However, because virtual communities often struggle with the recognition of the mitosis phase, by even just considering the recommendation, CYN could be, at the very least, overcoming a struggle that many other virtual communities do not.

Ultimately, it is up to CYN to transition into a state of pseudo-mitosis, but CYN may be wise to do so in an attempt to better engage its members. While the design and functionality of the social network analysis survey was not user friendly, it is alarming that over half of the CYN membership did not even open the survey. Given that the link to the survey was sent out through personalized emails (which is one of the primary means of communication in the network), the low survey response rate indicates that the CYN platform, pattern of interaction, or a combination of the two is flawed. A flawed platform presents one, relatively simple problem to address; however, a flawed pattern of interaction presents a sizeable problem because a virtual community's pattern of interaction is most critical to the sustainability of the community.

By entering a state of pseudo-mitosis and focusing on the development of sub-networks, CYN can address specific elements related to the pattern of interaction; and, CYN can customize its member participation strategies for each individual sub-network. For example, Maher & Maher pointed out that the central and northeast regions are the densest of the network. Due to the density of these sub-networks, it is possible that members may need more non-virtual opportunities to maintain, or even renew, their interest and commitment to the CYN network. Or in the east and southeast regions, where there are fewer connections, CYN can focus on increasing the variety of interactivity. Customization of approaches to fit the needs of sub-networks will require some work upfront, but if done correctly, the renewed commitment of members will prompt members to contribute to the network, which will attract new members who will then start contributing, and CYN will hopefully fall into a sustainable cycle of membership participation.

Despite the low completion rate of the social network analysis survey, Maher & Maher still provided CYN with useful insight about its network; and, through recommendations provided in the final report, Maher & Maher offered CYN steps on how to move the network forward. Even though some of the insights and recommendations identified the shortcomings of the coordination of the network, Maher & Maher also identified various strengths that CYN can and should use to its advantage. Also in the assessment of the CYN network, Maher & Maher tactfully illustrated that characteristics of the network might be hindering member participation. Since CYN exists to connect young Nebraskans, it is important that CYN clarifies its mission and better engages its members so as to better fulfill its goal of better connecting the state of Nebraska.



## chapter five

# FACILITATED MODEL BUILDING

### section 5.1

#### BACKGROUND

Wanting to anticipate change, rather than react to it, members of the CYN network engaged in a facilitated model building exercise. The goal of this exercise was to discuss potential organizational structures, formal or informal, that would best allow CYN to serve young Nebraskans in the future. Due to their familiarity with CYN, past and present steering committee members (hereafter referred to as “participants”) were invited to participate in the facilitated model building exercise.

To facilitate the virtual model building sessions, CYN employed three trained facilitators: Deb Burnight, Ester Mae Cox and Matt Rezac (hereafter referred to as “the facilitators”). Due to the limited availability of the participants, the model building exercise took the form of two virtual sessions. Exemplifying the virtual nature of CYN, model building participants connected audibly through a telephone conference system and visually through Adobe Connect. Capturing the essence of the virtual sessions, the facilitators provided rough transcripts of the conversations that were then summarized by CYN Graduate Assistant Gebhart, who also took screenshots of the Adobe Connect visuals. (Screenshots of the sessions can be found in Appendix C.)

To best guide the conversations of the two-part, virtually facilitated model building exercise, the facilitators utilized focused conversation methodology. Following a “natural, human process,” the focused conversation methodology allows “collective thinking to take place within a limited time frame” (The Institute of Cultural Affairs [ICA], 2000, p. 9). Applicable to many situations, the focused conversation methodology encourages meaningful dialogue, broadens a group’s perspective, elicits clear ideas and conclusions, and allows the entire group to participate (ICA, 2000, p. 9).

Two types of aims—rational and experiential—guide focused conversations. The rational aim is “the intent or practical goal of the conversation” and determines the direction of the conversation (ICA, 2000, p. 11). The experiential aim, however, is “the inner impact of the conversation” and sets the mood of the group, as well as the tone of the communication (ICA, 2000, p. 11).

In addition to pursuing two aims, the focused conversation methodology guides participants through four levels. The four levels of the conversation are objective, reflective, interpretive, and decisional (ICA, 2000, p. 11). At the objective level, people identify the “givens” of a situation by collecting facts and objective data (ICA, 2000, p. 15). The reflective level acknowledges reactions and emotions and allows participants to become personally

engaged in the conversation (ICA, 2000, p. 16). The interpretive level builds off the objective and reflective levels and creates a “collective consciousness and shared awareness within the group” (ICA, 2000, p. 17). Through resolution, the decisional level draws out deeper meaning and allows for the determination of action and future direction (ICA, 2000, p. 18).

Not all conversations are focused conversations, nor should they be. However, when there is no structure to a conversation, “there is often no way to ensure that each person’s thinking patterns and insights can be dealt with or be used productively by the group” (ICA, 2000, p. 21). Given the virtual nature and limited time frame of CYN’s model building conversations, the focused conversation methodology helped ensure the productive use of time.

## section 5.2

### **METHODS**

Having been trained by Burnight and Cox in Technology of Participation® facilitation methods, CYN Coordinator Schnuelle and Gebhart assisted in the development of the virtual model building exercise.

As the model building exercise was broken into two sessions, the sessions shared rational and experiential aims, but consisted of separate focused conversation structures. The rational aim was to explore and determine the function of the CYN network and what role participants will take in that future. The experiential aim was to have a shared understanding of the changes and address the future goals and intent of the network.

Also, because the virtual model building exercise was broken into two sessions, the focused conversations in each of the two sessions were approached and developed differently. While still eliciting productive conversations, the first session was to set the stage and get the conversation going. Knowing what needed to be accomplished in the first session, a complete focused conversation structure was developed well in advance. However, because the second session was entirely dependent on the outcome of the first session, the focused conversation structure for the second session was not developed until the first session had been completed. Because the first session ran short of time and required some of the discussion items to be moved to the second session, the second session’s focused conversation structure was not as comprehensive. Regardless, both sessions had a focused conversation structure that helped guide the model building exercise and elicit productive conversation.

## section 5.3

### **SESSION #1: MARCH 4**

The first of the two sessions was conducted on Monday, March 4, 2013. With a full agenda, there were two main purposes of the first session. First

and foremost, the context for change needed to be set. To help accomplish this, RFI Interim Director Mark Gustafson addressed how there may or may not be a CYN coordinator position within the RFI; however, because the RFI finds value in CYN, the RFI is willing to provide support as CYN transitions away from its previous status as a program of the Rural Initiative. Second, it was important during the initial session to begin identifying the possibilities for CYN's future purpose, role and function.

Facilitated by Burnight, Cox and Rezac, the March 4 session had thirteen participants. In addition, RFI Interim Director Gustafson sat in on the meeting to listen and provide clarity if questions arose regarding CYN's relationship with the RFI. With an hour and a half allocated for the March 4 session, the questions asked included:

- What have been some personal benefits you've experienced while participating in CYN?
- Where/when might there have been some gaps in CYN's organizational effectiveness?
- What have been important milestones and results?
- What has been built that we don't want to lose?
- What is CYN's unique niche? What can we do better than anyone else in the world?
- What could CYN work toward that will benefit young Nebraskans and your communities? Retention? Business transaction? Resources for grants? Other?
- What are some areas that might need some development if we are to continue as CYN?
- What are some possible structural models that would support the CYN of the future?

### **Conversation Summary**

The conversation started off with a presentation of the current context in which CYN exists: Schnuelle explained how she is now an employee of the RFI; Gebhart described the scope of her graduate level professional project and how it related to CYN; and Gustafson addressed the uncertainty of the capacity to which the RFI is able to support CYN in the future. Before transitioning out of the objective level of the conversation, participants were able to ask questions, if needed. The only question asked was whether or not the RFI had decided if or how much time might be allocated towards Schnuelle's role as the coordinator of CYN. Gustafson indicated that Schnuelle's time allotment had yet to be determined; however, the RFI would, at the very least, grant Schnuelle the time to assist in CYN's transition into whatever the participants decide.

Moving into the reflective level of the focused conversation, participants began identifying the personal benefits of CYN. Setting the tone of the first session, most of the participants indicated that CYN offered them social benefits, such as "networking," "meeting individuals from different

parts of the state,” and discovering a sense of statewide community (March 4 Transcript, 2013). While many of the benefits were social in nature, several participants also mentioned that CYN helped them start thinking differently about how communities grow strategically and learn community development best practices from other network members (March 4 Transcript, 2013). Another participant also identified the inspiration and sense of future potential that CYN summits elicit—it is a feeling that other statewide groups do not generate (March 4 Transcript, 2013).

Despite the many diverse benefits that CYN offers, the participants were able to point out several gaps in CYN’s organizational effectiveness. Of the gaps in organizational effectiveness, three gaps seemed most prominent. First, participants questioned CYN’s purpose and asked questions such as, “networking to what extent?” (March 4 Transcript, 2013). Second, there is a lack of activity between the annual summits; and third, there was limited participant follow-through of the action plans developed at the UNITE Nebraska event (March 4 Transcript, 2013).

Then, and after pinpointing some CYN milestones, participants transitioned into the interpretive level of the focused conversation by listing the things the CYN network has built or accomplished and that they do not want to lose. Overall, participants felt most strongly that the network could not stand to lose its diverse, expansive network of leaders, individuals and resources that is spread throughout the state (March 4 Transcript, 2013). Several participants also indicated that it was important to not let the UNITE Nebraska goals fall off the radar because the goals are necessary for the future of Nebraska (March 4 Transcript, 2013).

Keeping in mind the main ideas from the conversation thus far, the facilitators asked participants to speculate about what they think CYN’s niche might be. Immediately the conversation came back to the social benefits of the network: “we are one of the few groups that emphasize social relationships” (March 4 Transcript, 2013). In addition to being “one of the most welcoming groups” to join, participants also found CYN to be uniquely innovative, creative and interactive (March 4 Transcript, 2013). Additionally, one participant thought CYN could easily capitalize on its statewide status by continuing to work with the University of Nebraska, partnering with the state government, and leveraging the members already engaged with the CYN network.

Building off the niche question, participants were then asked to consider how CYN should evolve to best benefit young Nebraskans and Nebraska’s communities. Two main ideas emerged. First, CYN should focus on the retention and empowerment of Nebraska’s youth (March 4 Transcript, 2013). Second, CYN should help develop a better brand for the state of Nebraska because it will ultimately help retain and attract youth to the state (March 4 Transcript, 2013).

After allowing participants to identify any and all potential avenues for CYN to pursue, the facilitators then asked participants to name areas that will require development as CYN moves forward. While the expected issues of on-going funding and maintaining momentum between summits were mentioned, the participants also brought up the need for structure, assigned duties, and an improved chain of command, particularly if Schnuelle is not able to maintain her level of commitment as the coordinator (March 4 Transcript, 2013).

After addressing areas that need development, the conversation was slated to lead into a deeper discussion related to structure. Unfortunately, the allotted time for the call was nearly up and the facilitators were forced to begin wrapping up the conversation. Before ending the call, the facilitators began setting the stage for the second session. It became apparent that time should be allocated during the second session to clarifying a future focus for the network.

### **Session Follow Up**

In the three days between the first virtual model building session and the second, both the facilitators and the participants were charged with tasks. The facilitators, along with Schnuelle and Gebhart, were to use the same process used for the first session to develop the structure of the second session's conversation. The participants, on the other hand, had three tasks to complete. First, they were asked to read the section of Gebhart's literature review pertaining to the attributes of virtual communities and factors of sustainability (sections 2.3 and 2.4). Second, they were asked to review the final report from the UNITE Nebraska event to refresh their memories. Third, they were asked to respond to the following prompt: "Thinking futuristically, what should the focus/objective of CYN be in the next 3 years? Is this focus/objective consistent with your view of what CYN's niche should be? Explain."

Participants emailed their responses to Schnuelle, who then compiled the responses and provided a concise, bulleted list to the facilitators for use during the second virtual model building session (see Figure 11). It was the intent of the facilitators to use the list, along with any additional personal reflections about the network's future, to jump-start the March 8 conversation.

section 5.4

### **SESSION #2: MARCH 8**

The second session of the two-part virtual model building occurred on Friday, March 8, 2013. Nine people, seven of whom had participated in the first session, participated as Burnight and Rezac facilitated the session. Still sharing the same rational and experiential aim as the March 4 session, the second session had different objectives. First, the March 8 session needed to reach a consensus about CYN's focus. Second, participants needed to identify



potential actions and activities related to the agreed-upon focus. Third, there needed to be some discussion as to what type of organizational structure might support the newly established focus and its activities. Finally, there needed to be commitment in terms of the next steps. Due to the uncertainty of what the agreed upon focus might be, the facilitation of the March 8 call was relatively impromptu. However, some of the questions that guided the two-hour conversation were:

- What should the focus/objective of CYN be in the next 3 years?
- What can we agree to for CYN's focus?
- What would be some logical, practical, effective activities/actions for CYN over the next 3 years?
  - What is viable? What is doable? What is edgy? What is important to Nebraska's future? What could be fun?
- Taking these identified activities/actions, what would it take to make it happen?
- What can we commit to at this time? What are you willing to work on?
- What are you looking forward to, related to CYN's future?
- What are you not optimistic about, related to CYN's future?

### Conversation Summary

With a slightly different group of participants and with three days between the first session and the second, the facilitators decided to start the session by asking participants to recall a key word or phrase that they remembered from the first session (or for the new participants, a key word or phrase that stuck out to them in the first session's notes). With several variations of "defining a focus and/or purpose," the facilitators easily transitioned into the participants assigned task of responding to the for-the-next-call prompt. Letting the prompt responses (Figure 11) take the Adobe Connect screen, the

**Figure 11: The list of the responses to the between-sessions prompt**

**Thinking futuristically, what should the focus/objective of CYN be in the next 3 years? Is this focus/objective consistent with your view of what CYN's niche should be? Explain.**

- Become politically active
- Become... "The Young Nebraskans voice in the state"
- Develop more structure- regional, quarterly meetings
- Focus on keeping youth
- Identify career opportunities
- Implement UNITE Nebraska plan
- Social networking
- Become a speakers group
- Statewide parent organization to YP groups
- Virtually solve problems through social media
- Develop an App/FB App for CYNers to use as a social and problem solving venue
- Retention, policy & youth engagement
- Develop a platform/database to collect information

participants were able to discuss the responses, ask for clarifications, and even add to the list.

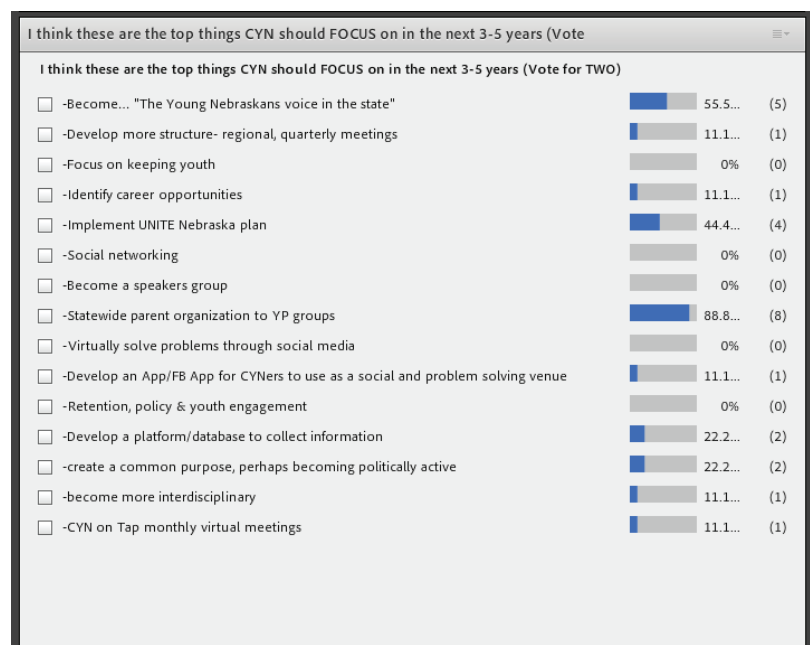
After thoughtful discussion about the potential focus of CYN, the facilitators put the list to a vote using a virtual Adobe Connect poll. Participants were asked to vote for up to three focuses that they felt CYN should pursue. The results of the poll (see Figure 12) created three “priority” items for the remainder of the facilitated model building session. The three priorities were: (1) become a statewide “parent” organization for local young professional groups (“parent” indicating an umbrella organization that connects but does not govern the local organizations); (2) implement UNITE Nebraska plans; and (3) become the young Nebraskan’s voice in the state (March 8 Transcript, 2013).

With the top three priorities items identified, the facilitators moved the participants into the next phase of the focused conversation and asked participants to list and discuss the kinds of actions and activities that would come out of pursuing these priorities.

To implement the idea of becoming the parent organization for local young professional groups, participants identified several activities. First and foremost, CYN needs to ask local groups if they are interested or find value in the proposition, as well as if the local groups are willing to “put skin in the game” (March 8 Transcript, 2013). If local groups are supportive of this idea, CYN would then have to start developing closer and stronger relations with those groups, and potentially implement some sort of structure, perhaps something like a board comprised of local young professional group representatives (March 8 Transcript, 2013).

**Figure 12:**  
**Priority item**  
**poll results**

The results of the poll used to determine the “priority” items during the second facilitated model building session, as displayed on the Adobe Connect screen.



Becoming a parent organization to local young professional groups across the state will benefit CYN by opening up the opportunities to share knowledge, skills and abilities statewide, and benefit local groups by bringing “fresh outside perspectives/solutions to lingering local issues” (March 8 Transcript, 2013).

To implement the action plans developed at the UNITE Nebraska event, the first step is to revisit the UNITE Nebraska final report (March 8 Transcript, 2013). CYN should also reconnect with UNITE Nebraska participants to determine if these participants are interested in carrying out the plans, and also to verify if any progress has occurred on any of the UNITE Nebraska initiatives (March 8 Transcript, 2013). After making these determinations, CYN can “encourage the development of interest-based sub-groups within the network that will work towards specific objectives” (March 8 Transcript, 2013).

Despite being identified as a priority item, participants did not specify any activities directly related to the implementation of CYN becoming the young Nebraskan voice in the state. It is expected, however, that through the growth and mobilization of the CYN network and the anticipated results of the UNITE Nebraska plans, young Nebraskans will be a voice and active group that can earn the respect of other leaders within the state of Nebraska.

With focus areas and potential activities discussed and identified, the facilitators transitioned the participants into the next phase by asking “what would it take to make this all happen?” (March 8 Transcript, 2013). In addition to money, time and other resources, two themes arose. The first dealt with member commitment and the second with organizational structure. As one participant put it, to move forward, CYN needs “people willing to make this a priority over the zillion other things they could be doing” (March 8 Transcript, 2013). These committed network members may be “champions,” a “highly engaged leadership team,” or volunteer groups (March 8 Transcript, 2013). To ensure effectiveness of these people, however, most of the participants expressed a need for more structure “because follow-through has been an issue to this point” (March 8 Transcript, 2013). While participants suggested “structured volunteer leadership” and a part-time paid coordinator position, the general consensus was that CYN needs stronger leadership or new organizational structure (March 8 Transcript, 2013). Recognizing that the structure would not and could not be determined during this facilitated model building session, one of the participants suggested the idea of identifying a successful model to follow instead of recreating the wheel (March 8 Transcript, 2013).

Moving the conversation along, the facilitators asked for any emerging insights regarding the conversations held during both of the virtual model building sessions. Some participants expressed concern that even though

they had determined three priority items, the items have the potential to be huge undertakings with high aspirations (March 8 Transcript, 2013). But, by clarifying CYN's purpose, big or small, CYN may find an existing (and perhaps more appropriate) place to house staff and share administrative costs (March 8 Transcript, 2013). Depending on the focus, potential places may be within the state Chamber of Commerce or the state Department of Economic Development (March 8 Transcript, 2013).

A few participants also noted a couple of key transitions or evolutions of the CYN network. First, based on the tone of the second session, CYN will begin to connect organizations and groups, whereas, before, CYN connected individuals (March 8 Transcript, 2013). Second, noting a difference between the first and second sessions, CYN is becoming less social-oriented and more action-oriented (March 8 Transcript, 2013). One participant even referred back to the poll (Figure 12) and pointed out that no one voted for social networking (March 8 Transcript, 2013).

Asking participants to reflect on everything discussed so far, and from both sessions, the facilitators progressed into the decisional phase of the conversation. The decisional phase resulted in two immediate next steps. First, some of the participants of the model building exercise will survey the young professional groups across the state of Nebraska, such as North Platte Young Professionals and Forward Wayne, to gauge interest in partnering with CYN. Second, some of the participants will develop and distribute a survey to UNITE Nebraska participants to determine if progress has been made since the event, as well as if the UNITE Nebraska participants are willing to re-engage and help implement the goals and action plans. In early April 2013, CYN members will reconvene to review the collected information and decide how to move forward.

With tasks determined, a timeline set, and the allotted time for the facilitated model building session coming to an end, the facilitators concluded the session by asking participants for any advice they have for the CYN network as it moves forward. Some participants offered practical advice, including reminders to share responsibilities so as to generate meaningful experiences for many people, "stay focused," and "commit only to what you can do, don't over commit and let things fall through" (March 8 Transcript, 2013). Other participants only offered encouragement, citing various reasons that make them excited to see CYN's momentum continue (March 8 Transcript, 2013).

Immediately after the call and before Schnuelle and Gebhart finished debriefing the virtual model building sessions with the facilitators, participants had already started exchanging emails about the implementation of the two identified action items.

## IMPLICATIONS

Due to the limited time allocated for facilitated model building, the exercise did not (and could not) result in the determination of an organizational model to implement within the CYN network. The facilitated model building did, however, start the process of identifying what type of leadership and/or organizational structure will best fit CYN. In fact, the facilitated model building exercise seems to have resulted in the CYN network, as a whole, returning to the storming phase of Tuckman's group development theory and the established phase of the CYN's community life cycle.

Still, in terms of group development and the online community life cycle, the most important outcome of the facilitated model building exercise was the consensus to keep the CYN network intact. With adjournment and death always being an option for any group or community, it is important to question whether or not the group or community needs to continue existing. Participants of the model building exercise clearly expressed that CYN still offers significant benefits to its members in a variety of capacities; thus, the need for the CYN network still exists.

If CYN is to continue existing, however, participants emphasized the need for CYN to become more effective. Both implicitly and explicitly, the participants contended that CYN's current ineffectiveness stems from the network's unclear purpose. Although second in importance to an expressed need for CYN, the recognition of CYN's unclear purpose is perhaps the most pivotal outcome of the facilitated model building. As the comparative analysis and the social network analysis (chapters three and four, respectively) both indicated, CYN has an unclear purpose with no identifiable objectives. Through the identification of three potential focus areas, though, the participants started moving CYN towards a clearer purpose. Unfortunately, the three focus areas may still be too broad and encompass much more than the CYN network is able or ready to take on. Regardless, CYN is working towards a healthier future by returning the storming and established phase of its group development and community life cycle, respectively, and reestablishing the network's purpose.

While the actual scope of CYN's newfound purpose(s) remains undetermined, the three identified focuses share the same underlying purpose of providing information and resources. In becoming a statewide umbrella organization, CYN will be mutually exchanging information and resources with local-based young professional groups. In pursuing the goals identified at the UNITE Nebraska event, CYN will be providing the state of Nebraska a resource by leveraging the network's social capital. And, in becoming "the voice" of young Nebraskans, CYN will be able to communicate (that is, provide information) to the state of Nebraska that young Nebraskans need in order to stay and thrive in the state. The three focus areas vary by whom the information and resources are being provided to, but each of the three areas

still requires a diverse statewide network of young Nebraskans.

Also related to the purpose, and as previously mentioned, the facilitated model building exercise demonstrated two key transitions or evolutions of the CYN network. The first transition is a shift from connecting individuals to connecting groups and organizations. The second transition involves a shift from a social-based purpose to an action-based purpose. While these transitions reflect the natural evolution of the network, because these transitions directly relate to the purpose of the network, the transitions must also be reflected in the rest of CYN's attributes. Thus, as CYN moves forward and begins adjusting the rest of the network's attributes, CYN must be cognizant that the adjustments directly support the reestablished purpose.

In addition to these two key transitions or evolutions, the network's forward movement may erroneously portray a third transition. The first facilitated model building session illustrated that if CYN is to remain social, it needs a platform that allows better social interaction, while the second session resulted in a decision to move the network away from a social orientation. This is not to say, however, CYN is becoming less social. CYN will still connect individuals (because individuals comprise organizations); CYN will just be connecting individuals *through* organizational partnerships. Furthermore, the CYN network will rely on its social network to leverage its social capital potential. Both UNITE Nebraska participants and CYN network members recognize how valuable individual relationships and social capital are, so it is unlikely that CYN will become less social during the upcoming transition.

The elimination of CYN's social nature may be unlikely, but it is possible that the upcoming transition may unintentionally cause some CYN members to grow disenfranchised with the network. While almost all of the UNITE Nebraska participants were either already part of the CYN network or joined the network after the UNITE Nebraska event, it is important to remember that CYN is separate from UNITE Nebraska. It is more of a coincidence (and perhaps a matter of convenience) that the CYN network consists of a good majority of UNITE Nebraska participants. Thus, it is advisable that CYN approach the implementation of the action plans set forth by the UNITE Nebraska event with caution, especially since many network members are not aware of the UNITE Nebraska event. The decision to fulfill the agenda of a non-CYN event may ultimately result in the alienation of CYN network members who were not involved in the UNITE Nebraska. While the risk of alienation must be kept in mind, risk should not prevent CYN from pursuing that proposed focus—CYN just needs to be tactful in its approach and genuinely involve all CYN members, not just those who were involved in UNITE Nebraska.

Overall, and despite an attempt to solidify a clearer focus, the facilitated model building sessions demonstrated a sense of identity crisis within



the network. The first session focused on the social aspects of CYN, and the second session focused on the need for action and structure within the network. This identity crisis may have been exacerbated by the limited time and the change in participants between the sessions, but as facilitator Burnight said, “the world is run by those who show up” (March 8 Transcript, 2013). If a different group of people would have participated in the second session, the immediate next steps may very well have been different. Regardless, as CYN recycles through its group development and community life cycle and reestablishes a new purpose, it is important to remember that the “reasons that drew CYN together still exist” (March 8 Transcript, 2013).



## chapter six

# ALTERNATIVES FOR THE FUTURE

### section 6.1

#### MOVING FORWARD

Before CYN can choose an appropriate framework or model to implement, the CYN network must do considerable work. First, CYN needs to outline the network's vision and mission (Work Group for Community Health and Development [WGCHD], 2013, no. 2). Second, CYN needs to state the objectives of its vision and mission (WGCHD, 2013, no. 3). And third, CYN needs to determine the intent and scope of the network's framework; that is, determine how and to what extent network members will rely on CYN's framework (WGCHD, 2013, no. 4).

During this process, the network may choose to keep its current mission of connecting, empowering and retaining young Nebraskans, but if that is the case, CYN will then have to distinguish specific focus areas and emphasize its second task of identifying explicit objectives. Once the network is clear on its purpose and objectives, CYN can more easily identify and implement the type of framework that best supports its purpose and objectives.

Initiated by the facilitated model building exercise, CYN is currently working towards clarifying its purpose. While the facilitated model building exercise resulted in action steps that could lead to CYN's transition into an action-oriented network, which provides information and resources, the facilitated model building exercise also unveiled a small identity crisis that should be addressed to prevent future uncertainty about the network's purpose. Recall that the first session of the facilitated model building exercise emphasized the unique sociability of the network, and the second session expressed a need for more action and activity within the network. Because sociability and action require different supporting attributes and frameworks, CYN must decide between one and the other. Alternatively, CYN could pursue both purposes, but it will require clear articulation of the objectives of both purposes and a more deliberate implementation of supporting attributes and frameworks.

Given that it is uncertain what CYN will designate as its main purpose, it is difficult to identify which organizational framework will best support the purpose. Therefore, the following proposed alternatives are broad enough to address multiple purposes.

### **ALTERNATIVE #1: Evolve into a “parent” organization for Nebraska’s young professionals groups**

The first alternative, which was proposed and discussed in some detail during the facilitated model building exercise, is to transition CYN into a “parent,” or umbrella, organization to support the various young professionals groups (YPGs) across the state of Nebraska. Depending on the interest and cooperation of the local-based YPGs, the degree to which CYN “parents” the local-based YPGs can vary from loose partnerships to complete governance. However, regardless of the types of relationships between CYN and local-based YPGs, this framework would best support an action-oriented purpose of providing information and resources. Like the North Dakota Young Professionals (NDYP) network, the statewide group could focus on the provision of information and resources, while the local YPGs provide social benefits, such as face-to-face interaction opportunities.

In addition to maintaining its network of individual members, CYN could begin incorporating the various YPGs across the state into its network. The coordination of such a network would require some level of centralization through a coordinator. Modeling after NDYP’s framework, this coordinator could dedicate five to ten hours a week toward the coordination of the network, which would primarily include marketing, disseminating information within the network, and being the liaison between the network and other entities. It is possible that the coordinator position could be filled by a volunteer, but due to the weekly time commitment, it is more appropriate to find organizational support. With a weekly commitment of five to ten hours (as opposed to Schnuelle’s previous weekly commitment of 20 to 30 hours), the RFI may be willing to provide this organizational support. Otherwise, with a more defined purpose, CYN may be able to find support from an organization that shares or relates to CYN’s redefined purpose and objectives.

Under this framework, the current places and platforms of CYN would not have to change significantly. Most notably, CYN would have to find a more permanent website host—but like NDYP, this could be done by issuing a request for proposals about the development and hosting of a website (Morse-Dell, 2013). To minimize the cost of this endeavor, CYN could either market it as a resume-builder or as a sponsorship of CYN, or CYN could solicit funds to pay for at least part of the website’s development. Additionally, CYN would have to create a formal network directory, which would provide information about partnering local-based YPGs, as one of their resources. CYN already has the makings of a network directory, but until support from the individual local YPGs is confirmed, CYN’s list of Nebraska’s YPGs remains just a list, not a directory of partnering groups.

To maintain CYN’s non-virtual spaces, face-to-face opportunities, like the annual summit, could also be provided through this framework. NDYP sets a

manageable precedence by issuing a request for proposals to the local-based groups to host its annual summit. The group that is selected to host the summit is then “in charge” of summit coordination. Serving no more than an advisory role during the coordination of the summit, the CYN coordinator would be able to maintain her or his weekly commitment of just five to ten hours. Similar to NDYP, this outsourcing of coordination would demonstrate delegative leadership.

Also, in regard to leadership, it would be beneficial to have some sort of informal leadership structure within the CYN network. NDYP utilizes a system of task forces, in which small groups form around specific projects and dissolve when the projects’ goals are accomplished. This could potentially grant CYN members leadership responsibility within the network. Although NDYP chose to abandon its standing board because it began meeting “just to have meetings,” the statewide, umbrella framework could still benefit from CYN’s current steering committee concept (Morse-Dell, 2013). In addition, it might be worthwhile to incorporate representatives from the partnering YPGs into the steering committee. Making sure not to follow in NDYP’s standing board footsteps, though, the steering committee should continue meeting only when necessary, rather than on a regular basis.

Although this framework could allow CYN to become a revenue-generating network, the network may be better off remaining non-revenue generating because there is little, if any, money to be made as a statewide umbrella group of Nebraska’s YPGs. Not to mention, adding revenue management to the coordinator’s duties would add a considerable amount of additional work to a relatively minimal weekly time commitment. Plus, having been a non-revenue generating network thus far, CYN is already familiar with the various means that would help offset the coordination and operating costs. CYN could model NDYP by implementing a membership fee. But, seeking corporate sponsorship may prove to be ideal because CYN has previously, and successfully, sought sponsorships to cover the costs of the annual CYN Summit. However, it is important to consider that seeking sponsorship for an event may be easier than seeking sponsorship for the coordination of virtual community.

If CYN were to implement the statewide, umbrella group framework, the attributes of the network would change; and, to ensure the success of this framework, it is important that the CYN network understand how and why the network’s attributes would need to change. Table 8 illustrates how the attributes of the CYN network might change if CYN implements this framework.

The statewide, umbrella group framework offers a variety of benefits. By connecting organizations and groups, as well as individuals, CYN is better connecting the state of Nebraska as a whole. But, also in the process, CYN

Table 8: CYN’s potential attributes, alternative no. 1

	Current attributes of CYN	Potential attributes of statewide, umbrella framework
<b>Purpose</b>	To develop statewide relationships	To provide information and resources
<b>Place</b>	Hybrid	Hybrid
<b>Platform</b>	Hybrid	Hybrid
<b>Population Interaction Structure</b>	Semi-public network	Semi-public network
<b>Profit Model</b>	Non-revenue generating	Non-revenue generating
<b>Establishment</b>	Organization-sponsored	Organization-sponsored
<b>Leadership</b>	Participative	Delegative
<b>Protocol</b>	Unwritten community norms	To be determined

Note. These attributes are based on the proposal to transition CYN into a “parent” organization to other Nebraska YPGs.

is developing smaller sub-networks to manage—which is concurrent with a recommendation provided by Maher & Maher from the social network analysis. While geographic-based sub-networks are more likely to develop than interest-based sub-networks, all of CYN’s sub-networks will be relatively organic and fluctuate as activities and projects dictate. Regardless of the formality of sub-networks, though, the development of sub-networks will improve the overall health and strength of the whole network.

Just as there are benefits, there are also some drawbacks to becoming the statewide, umbrella young professional group. First, and most pressing, is that this option requires buy-in from locally based groups because without their partnership, CYN has nothing to “parent” or connect. Also, this framework requires some centralization of power. While CYN can decentralize to a certain extent through committees and work groups, the coordinator will remain at the center of the network.

section 6.3

**ALTERNATIVE #2: Transition CYN into a platform**

If CYN wants to maintain its socially oriented purpose of fostering statewide relationships, a second alternative to consider is turning the network of CYN into a platform—or the means through which young Nebraskans interact. In this framework, CYN would become less of a network and more of a mechanism. As a platform, CYN would no longer require *coordination*; rather, CYN would require *maintenance*.

Transitioning CYN into a platform could take a variety of forms. Most simply, CYN could create a “group” on Facebook, thereby creating a

CYN community within a pre-existing social media site. Advancing the platform concept further, however, CYN could develop an interactive young Nebraskans directory that network members could utilize. To best support social and professional connections, the directory should be capable of advanced searching. For example, if an individual wanted to find a fellow young Nebraskans to discuss rural community development, that individual could use the directory to find and connect with those who have listed rural community development as a professional focus area. Or, at an even more advanced state, CYN could develop its own social media site. Regardless of the form CYN's platform takes, though, to help ensure continued use, CYN should consider building in the capability for the platform to sync with a pre-existing profile, such as Facebook, to prevent members from having to manage and update an entirely new profile in CYN's new virtual place.

As a socially oriented statewide network, CYN strives to better connect the state of Nebraska. While this concept strengthens the state of Nebraskan in many ways, this statewide connectedness currently does little to provide tangible benefits to individuals, leading network members to ask, "networking to what extent?" This question has proven difficult to answer because members *should* be experiencing the benefits that prompted them to join the network in the first place; but it is likely that CYN is just ineffective in providing tangible member benefits.

Currently, CYN offers several places and platforms for members to interact, but because relationship development requires frequent and consistent interactions, CYN's places and platforms are proving to be mediocre, at best. Thus, the designation of one, well-crafted virtual space and platform could help deliver tangible benefits for network members.

Moreover, the lack of a designated CYN platform is resulting in the inaccessibility of the network. Maher & Maher's social network analysis found that CYN has a healthy, diverse network. Despite this, only CYN Coordinator Schnuelle and highly engaged network members can readily use the network as a resource because they have developed extensive personal networks within the greater CYN network. Unfortunately, a good majority of the CYN network is unable to effectively access the network without going through Schnuelle or a highly engaged member. Turning CYN into a platform, however, would allow all members equal access to the entire network, granting them the ability to utilize the network for their own needs, which should yield increased personal benefits to members.

This become-a-platform alternative would not only result in the designation of one space and platform, but it would also allow CYN to capitalize on one of its strengths: networking. The first session of the facilitated model building exercise demonstrated that CYN is unique in its sociability, but the social network analysis and 2012 CYN Summit attendance illustrated that members of the network actually are not very engaged in the network's

activities. Through the CYN platform, network members could better connect to other network members who are not in their immediate networks.

Growing and developing the greater CYN network is critical to creating a better-connected state of Nebraska, but the emphasis need not be on the network in its entirety. Rather, the emphasis should fall on the individual relationships that comprise the network, because that is where the “value” of the network resides. Thus, the transition of CYN into a platform will result in dissolving the formal nature of the network and the creation of a platform that facilitates and fosters statewide connections. In other words, CYN would no longer be a network. Instead, young Nebraskans would use CYN to grow their own personal networks. It should be kept in mind, however, that because the CYN network is just a collection of individual connections, the CYN network will continue to exist in some form, regardless of its formality.

As a result of transitioning into a platform, the CYN network would become member-initiated, in which members drive interactions while CYN provides the space and place for connections. Due to its member-initiated nature, CYN would no longer need a coordinator after a short transition phase, during which the platform begins to take shape. Once CYN’s platform is populated with existing CYN members, then CYN would slide towards the decentralized end of the centralization spectrum.

The concept of turning CYN into a platform is relatively abstract, but if done correctly (that is, if the platform is built to support CYN’s social orientation), the CYN network would become self-sustainable. Similar to Wikipedia providing information as a resource, CYN would provide access to human capital as a resource. Those who experience benefits and enjoyment from utilizing the CYN platform will continue using it and talk about their positive experiences with it, which will prompt other young Nebraskans to join, experience the benefits, and in turn spread the word that encourages new members to join. People can and will choose to disassociate from the platform, but even with disassociation, the personal connections that comprise the whole network will remain intact.

Depending on the complexity of the platform, the upfront cost of developing a CYN platform to support the network may be high, but the platform concept is cost effective in the long term because it eliminates the need for staffing and a minimal annual maintenance fee is all that it would need to continue. To initiate development of the platform, CYN should solicit a request for proposals outlining the characteristics of a specified concept. CYN could see if any developers are willing to develop the platform as a resume-building experience, or CYN could seek corporate sponsorship or apply for a grant to fund the undertaking.

One of the greatest benefits of turning CYN into a platform is that CYN would be able to better serve its network members. As previously mentioned,



Schnuelle and other highly engaged network members currently act as the statewide connection facilitators, but their capacity to do this is limited by the size of their personal networks. Thus, a platform would facilitate connections that may not otherwise occur. Additionally, by becoming a platform, CYN would be relatively free from third-party interests. While the Rural Initiative historically did not use CYN to further its agenda, moving CYN away from the management structure of a larger organization might enable the network to better serve its members.

Although CYN would no longer provide face-to-face opportunities for people to interact, the platform would not limit young Nebraskans to virtual interactions. In fact, the platform may do just the opposite. By allowing all members to initiate interactions, face-to-face opportunities may increase. So, rather than providing a large-scale, face-to-face meeting through an annual summit, the CYN platform would encourage many smaller, sometimes one-on-one meet ups. This characteristic would also benefit members because people vary on the spectrum of desire to engage in networking. While some individuals thrive in large-scale meet ups, more introverted people prefer smaller, more personal settings to develop relationships.

The major drawback to this alternative is the technical expertise it will require, particularly in the more complex manifestations of the platform. Moreover, if CYN chooses to develop its own social networking site, CYN should avoid competing with other social networking sites like Facebook, simply because CYN cannot compete on that scale. Thus, the idea of drawing from a current profile will prove to be valuable, so as to prevent members from having yet another virtual profile to maintain.

**Table 9: CYN's potential attributes, alternative no. 2**

	<b>Current attributes of CYN</b>	<b>Potential Attributes of CYN as a Platform</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	To develop statewide relationships	To develop statewide relationships
<b>Place</b>	Hybrid	Virtual
<b>Platform</b>	Hybrid	Synchronous virtual communication
<b>Population Interaction Structure</b>	Semi-public network	To be determined
<b>Profit Model</b>	Non-revenue generating	Non-revenue generating
<b>Establishment</b>	Organization-sponsored	Member-initiated
<b>Leadership</b>	Participative	Distributed authority
<b>Protocol</b>	Unwritten community norms	To be determined

*Note.* These attributes are based on the proposal to transition CYN into a platform.



As with the first alternative, if CYN were to transition into a platform, attributes of the network would change; and again, to ensure the success of this framework, it is important that members of the CYN network understand how and why the network's attributes would need to change. Table 9 illustrates how the attributes of the CYN network might change if CYN implements this framework.

#### section 6.4

### **ALTERNATIVE #3: Transition CYN into a stand-alone entity**

A third alternative CYN could consider is becoming a stand-alone entity. While CYN has a plethora of avenues to pursue in this endeavor, becoming a non-profit of 501(c)(3) status is probably CYN's best option because this status would provide CYN with complete control over its aspirations. The 501(c)(3) would need to have a governing board, and probably a paid employee to serve as a director. It would add more structure to CYN, which would be welcomed by many network members. Additionally, a non-profit status would allow CYN to develop a set of by-laws that would help maintain the network's identity and allow CYN to step away from oversight by the University of Nebraska.

With the CYN Steering Committee having serious conversations about becoming a stand-alone entity in the summer of 2011, this alternative is not a new concept for CYN to consider. However, with the results of the facilitated model building exercise pointing for the need for improved leadership and organizational structure, becoming a stand-alone entity may be a viable option if CYN can determine a clear focus. Although CYN could be socially oriented as a stand-alone entity, this alternative would better support a purpose of providing information and resources. As the facilitated model building exercise also brought to light, the three identified focus areas have the potential to be huge undertakings. (Recall that the three focus areas are: (1) become a statewide "parent" organization for local young professional groups ["parent" indicating an umbrella organization that connects but does not govern the local organizations]; (2) implement UNITE Nebraska plans; and (3) become the young Nebraskan's voice in the state.) While other frameworks may not be able to support such undertakings, a non-profit framework could. However, before CYN pursues this option, the network must be certain that there is adequate interest and support of either becoming a statewide umbrella network to Nebraska's YPGs or fulfilling the action plans from UNITE Nebraska.

This framework would require full-time staffing and the implementation of some sort of hierarchy. As a result of this, CYN would quickly become a centralized organization. While there will be some ability to maintain some degree of decentralization, the very nature of a stand-alone entity will require significant centralization to maintain effectiveness and productivity.

Given the uncertainty of CYN’s purpose and scope of work as a stand-alone entity, it is difficult to determine how this alternative would affect CYN’s place and platform. However, if CYN pursues the focus areas identified in the facilitated model building exercise, CYN will become more action oriented. Although some actions can be carried out virtually, CYN will most likely rely more on face-to-face interactions, resulting in a non-virtual place and platform. This is not to say, however, that CYN would abandon its virtual presence; rather, in efforts to fulfill its purpose, CYN would become less virtual.

Due to the staffing implied for this alternative, not to mention the issues of funding, becoming a stand-alone entity may be an alternative for CYN to consider in the longer-term future. Although viable now, CYN may want to hold off on becoming a stand-alone entity until CYN gains some experience and recognizes success in its new purpose.

However, if becoming a stand-alone entity is the alternative that resonates the most with the CYN network, a close look at Stay Work Play New Hampshire (SWP) may prove to be beneficial. SWP is non-profit organization that is guided by its mission statement of working “collaboratively across New Hampshire to support ongoing economic, workforce, and community development by promoting the state as a favorable place for young workers and recent college graduates to stay, work and play, when considering employment and lifestyle opportunities” (Stay Work Play New Hampshire, 2013). Although slightly different than the missions of both CYN and NDYP, SWP offers a non-profit framework that may be an model for CYN to follow.

**Table 10. CYN’s potential attributes, alternative no. 3**

	<b>Current attributes of CYN</b>	<b>Recommended attributes of CYN as a 501(c)(3) non-profit</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	To develop statewide relationships	To provide information and resources
<b>Place</b>	Hybrid	Non-virtual
<b>Platform</b>	Hybrid	Synchronous non-virtual meet ups
<b>Population Interaction Structure</b>	Semi-public network	To be determined
<b>Profit Model</b>	Non-revenue generating	Non-revenue generating
<b>Establishment</b>	Organization-sponsored	Organization-sponsored
<b>Leadership</b>	Participative	To be determined
<b>Protocol</b>	Unwritten community norms	Formal written policies

*Note.* These attributes are based on the proposal to transition CYN into a stand-alone entity.

As with the first alternative, if CYN were to become a stand-alone entity, the attributes of the network would change, and because these changes could significantly affect the success of CYN, it is important that the CYN network understand how and why the network's attributes would need to change. Table 10 illustrates how the attributes of the CYN network might change if CYN were to become a stand-alone entity.

#### section 6.5

### **ALTERNATIVE #4: Hybrid**

Another feasible alternative for CYN to consider is combining some of the elements of the preceding alternatives and create a hybrid alternative. Perhaps CYN could become the statewide umbrella young professionals group, and also create a CYN-specific platform along the way; or, maybe CYN could first develop the structure and relationships required to become the statewide umbrella young professionals network; then, once the structure proves to function well, CYN could pursue a 501(c)(3) non-profit status. Additionally, CYN may choose to pair an above listed alternative with elements of a framework of another organization that CYN identifies as applicable.

There are both benefits and drawbacks to the various hybrid alternative possibilities, but the most cautionary element involved in creating a hybrid framework is the clashing of underlying purposes. Currently, CYN is struggling because of its unclear purpose; therefore, it is important that CYN clearly articulate its purpose. It is possible that CYN could seek to accomplish two different purposes (i.e., fostering statewide relationship development and providing information and resources), but CYN must make sure that its remaining attributes and anticipated framework adequately support both purposes.

#### section 6.6

### **ALTERNATIVE #5: Dissolve the formal structure of CYN**

Although the facilitated model building exercise elicited a consensus that CYN should continue to exist, intentional discontinuation, or "death," of the network is still an option. If the CYN network cannot find a common purpose to rally around or if the network refuses to divide the network into small, focused sub-networks, dissolving the network may be the best option. Discontinuing the CYN network will require a strategic exit strategy that emphasizes the importance of the existing connections and acknowledges the worthwhile efforts of CYN.

While dissolving CYN may not sound or appear to be the greatest of alternatives, it is important to remember that even if the CYN network formally dissolves, the relationships developed can remain intact. In fact, dissolving CYN will primarily be in name only, because the network

is comprised of individual social relationships across the state. The disappearance of the CYN name will not destroy these individual relationships; it will just require individuals to connect through the places and platforms offered by other organizations and groups within the state of Nebraska.



## chapter seven

# RECOMMENDATION

### section 7.1

#### **SUPPORTING A DYNAMIC NETWORK**

The future of CYN is dependent upon the network's clarification of its purpose and objectives. Without a clear purpose, the reason for CYN's existence is questionable, and sustaining member engagement becomes problematic. Additionally, without a clear purpose, it is difficult to identify and implement an appropriate community or organizational framework.

Adding to the need for a clear purpose, CYN has also identified a need for a new framework. CYN's current framework was utilized to help grow and develop the network, initially. Now that the network is established, CYN needs to adopt a new framework—a framework that is flexible enough to support the dynamic nature of the network. The CYN network is constantly evolving, and only a flexible framework can support the needs of such a network. Therefore, CYN's future framework must be able to adapt, both in form and function, to the changing of time, technology, current issues and members' needs.

Through the focus areas identified by the facilitated model building exercise, the CYN network indicated that the future purpose of CYN should be to provide information and services. Currently, network members are gauging the interest and commitment needed to support this purpose. If adequate interest and commitment is expressed, CYN network members will then let form follow function and begin identifying frameworks that would also support the network's new purpose.

### section 7.2

#### **THE RECOMMENDED FRAMEWORK**

With a thorough understanding of the network and its circumstances, and given that CYN is operating in a dynamic environment, CYN should pursue a hybrid alternative in which it becomes a statewide umbrella organization that utilizes a platform. This hybrid alternative would be a combination of the previously discussed alternatives numbered one and two (sections 6.2 and 6.3, respectively). The statewide umbrella organization would fulfill the interest of becoming an action-oriented network with some structure, while the development of a platform would maintain CYN's unique sociability. Heeding the cautionary advice mentioned in the proposal of a hybrid framework, CYN must be careful that its attributes adequately support its two-pronged purpose.

While the CYN network may thrive as an action-oriented network, it is also possible that the interest and commitment to being an action-oriented group could fizzle out—much like what occurred with UNITE Nebraska. Therefore, it is recommended that the statewide parent organization framework be kept relatively basic. For self-preservation, the CYN network should not expend too much effort and resources into this initiative until ample interest, commitment and action from network members is evident. If network members rise to this action-oriented focus, the framework can be further developed, and perhaps eventually there will be a need for a non-profit framework.

In conjunction with an action-oriented, statewide umbrella group, the development of a CYN platform seems to be a worthwhile pursuit for various reasons. First, the design of this platform could include elements that could help maintain member interest and commitment to CYN activities. Second, if CYN's action-oriented focus is successful, the platform will supplement the benefits of CYN by providing sociability throughout the state. Third, if the action-oriented focus of CYN proves unsuccessful, the network can revert back its original focus of networking but with a platform that better supports the purpose. Finally, if the CYN network was to be formally dissolved for any reason, this platform could remain and be maintained by another organization (or even the members), and still work toward connecting the state of Nebraska.

Despite the sponsor organization's likely provision of a network coordinator, this hybrid framework would allow CYN to function as a member-initiated network, in which the members drive the development and activities. (Recall that Wikipedia is also an organization-sponsored virtual community that functions, quite successfully, as a member-initiated community.) This evolution of the CYN network is valuable because member-initiated groups generally tend to be self-sustaining and require minimal funding and coordination. Conveniently, these characteristics will also make it easier to find organizational support, if the University of Nebraska Rural Futures Institute (RFI) is unwilling to do so. However, given the vision and mission of the RFI, it is evident that CYN falls within the realm of the RFI and CYN will remain an important population to engage in the RFI.

Though the implementation of this hybrid alternative, in which CYN becomes a statewide umbrella organization and a platform, the attributes of CYN will change. Table 11 illustrates the evolution from what CYN's current status is to what it could be. While the differences may not seem that great, the fundamental change (aside from the purpose) is the development and implementation of one "official" CYN place and platform. CYN may maintain some of its current spaces and platforms, but this recommendation emphasizes the need for an official place and platform that allows for more synchronous virtual interactions. Increasing the synchronicity of virtual communications will, hopefully, elicit greater member engagement and participation in the network.



**Table 11: The recommended attributes for CYN**

	<b>Current attributes of CYN</b>	<b>Recommended attributes of CYN</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	To develop statewide relationships	To provide information and resources To develop statewide relationships
<b>Place</b>	Hybrid	Hybrid
<b>Platform</b>	Hybrid	Hybrid
<b>Population Interaction Structure</b>	Semi-public network	Semi-public network
<b>Profit Model</b>	Non-revenue generating	Non-revenue generating
<b>Establishment</b>	Organization-sponsored	Organization-sponsored ( <i>functions as member-initiated</i> )
<b>Leadership</b>	Participative	Delegative
<b>Protocol</b>	Unwritten community norms	To be determined

*Note.* These attributes reflect the recommendation in which CYN becomes a statewide umbrella organization and a platform.

Given the current uncertainty of the CYN network, this recommendation is merely just that: a recommendation. As CYN moves forward, the network needs to develop its attributes and framework to support its clarified purpose. After clarification of its purpose, CYN may find this recommendation to be the perfect fit, completely irrelevant, or somewhere in between. Regardless of how applicable the CYN network finds this recommendation, it is strongly recommended that the CYN network return to and utilize the research presented in this project. A valuable resource for CYN to draw from, the research and concepts presented in this project will better allow CYN to develop and implement a framework that will ensure CYN a healthy future.

Additionally, and as the facilitated model building session indicated, there is no need to recreate the wheel in terms of inventing a new framework: CYN should simply find a model, or combination of models, that works elsewhere and adjust the model to fit the CYN network. This project has already identified two models, NDYP and SWP, for CYN to consider, but there are many other frameworks that may be suitable after the network identifies its purpose.

Unfortunately, because CYN has yet to determine a purpose, the identification of immediate actions steps is limited. But, while the network's purpose is being determined, it is important that network members do not allow coordination failure to hinder CYN's current momentum. In the process of reestablishing its purpose, the CYN network lingers at a pivotal and critical point in its community life cycle. The network needs Schnuelle to help lead and guide the network through this upcoming transition, but the network must also respect Schnuelle's need to limit her

role and responsibilities related to the network. To successfully navigate this transition, the network needs Schnuelle's experience and familiarity of the network, as well as the support and efforts of other engaged network members.

#### section 7.3

### NEXT STEPS

Recognizing and understanding the need to clarify the network's purpose, CYN Coordinator Schnuelle and CYN Graduate Assistant Gebhart decided to pursue training in strategic planning. Combining their previous ToP<sup>®</sup> facilitation training with their anticipated strategic planning skills, Schnuelle and Gebhart hope to draw out productive conversations at a future face-to-face strategic planning meeting. Although the date of the meeting has yet to be determined, it is expected that this future in-person strategic planning meeting will result in a clearer purpose for CYN that has identifiable and measurable objectives.

In addition to engaging in organized strategic planning, the CYN Steering Committee has also decided to include the whole network in the next steps of CYN's transition. While also surveying the various YP groups throughout the state and participants of UNITE Nebraska as part of their facilitated model building action steps, the CYN Steering Committee is developing an informative email regarding conversations had since the 2012 CYN Summit with a link to a survey. The CYN Steering Committee hopes the survey will elicit more insight regarding the future of the network, as well as provide the steering committee with a stronger consensus as to which purpose the network should pursue.

#### section 7.4

### ENDURING THE TRANSITION

While uncertainty surrounds the long-term sustainability of CYN, the future of CYN is not bleak. It is important to remember that an organization's success is measured over a period of time, not by how gracefully the organization does or does not transition. And, because the concept of virtual communities is still relatively new, there is little factual data regarding the best practices of long-term virtual community development and maintenance. Fortunately for CYN, though, the CYN network is comprised of Millennials—a generation that adapts well to change. This may indicate that even if the transition is bumpy, the network's members will endure and possibly even prosper with the transition. In fact, given the demographic characteristics of the network members and the limited research regarding long-term sustainability of virtual communities, CYN's future framework could eventually set a precedent for virtual communities.

Before precedence can be set, however, CYN must first identify its future propose and objectives, as well as a supporting framework. The recommended hybrid framework in which CYN becomes a statewide umbrella organization that utilizes a CYN-specific platform accounts for both the wishes of the network and the dynamic nature of a virtual community. If the network is to accept this recommendation, the implementation of this recommendation may, in fact, lead to a framework that will support the network's dynamic nature, engage the network's geographically dispersed members, and capitalize on the network's clearly identified strength of sociability.



## epilogue

# REFLECTIONS

### GENERAL THOUGHTS

The concept of virtual communities proved to be an interesting topic to research. Virtual communities are unique; and, compared to traditional, face-to-face communities, they present a different set of characteristics and factors of sustainability to consider. The unique culture of virtual communities appears to best be supported by transformative leadership. However, this type of leadership is sometimes difficult to implement and challenging for followers to embrace.

While this project did present a broad overview of current research about virtual communities, if more research was to be done, it may be worthwhile to consider the concept of volunteerism and how it relates to virtual communities. However, given that volunteerism has the potential to be a graduate level professional project in itself, it was not pursued in the scope of this project. Regardless, research regarding volunteerism may have proved useful to this project because the CYN network is currently a volunteer-driven network. Aside from Schnuelle, the compensated coordinator, all of the network's activities have been coordinated and supported by network members who volunteer their time and skills. CYN's future reliance on volunteerism has yet to be determined; but some research regarding volunteerism may have been able to shed additional light on the varying engagement levels of members.

It might also have been helpful to let research influence the facilitated model building exercise. While Schnuelle, the model building facilitators and I considered having this project's research direct the model building exercise, we decided against this for two reasons. First, the CYN network exists to serve the needs of young Nebraskans; thus, it was important to allow young Nebraskans to voice their needs and then apply the research to find the best way to fulfill those needs. Second, with the discontinuation of the Rural Initiative and the Rural Futures Institute becoming an unofficial organizational sponsor (at least until CYN decides how it wants to move forward), it is possible that CYN members might perceive the current situation as a problem caused by the organizational sponsor. To minimize this perception, it was important that this transition be a "bottom-up" transition rather than a "top-down" transition.

### STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

Perhaps the greatest strength of this project is its general applicability. While the intent of this project was to provide CYN with a recommendation for moving forward, this project resulted in something much greater—this

project generated a collection of research regarding virtual communities. Although other virtual communities have access to the same information, this project has already applied the research to the CYN network, which makes the research all the more usable as CYN moves forward. Thus, regardless of whether CYN pursues the recommendation of this project, the general applicability of the research provides an additional benefit to CYN.

Another strength of this project was my familiarity with CYN—because of this I did not have to spend time learning about the network. Having worked with the coordinator of the network for almost the entire lifespan of CYN, I already knew the ins and outs of the network. Aside from Schnuelle, no one is more familiar with the network than me. This intimate knowledge not only allowed me to readily identify the strengths and weaknesses of CYN; it also granted me the ability to more thoroughly analyze the complex and dynamic nature of the network.

Moreover, my knowledge of the organizational-sponsorship of CYN was also valuable. As a former employee of the Rural Initiative and a current employee of the Rural Futures Institute (RFI), I not only understand why the network is forced to transition; I also understand the urgency of the matter.

While my intimate knowledge of CYN and the RFI may have proved to be an asset in the completion of this project, my intimate knowledge may also have led to some bias in the insights and recommendations. Having worked for the network, albeit unofficially, I went into the project with a strong sense of the network's coordination. Although I participate in the network like other members, my experiences are completely different and driven by the coordination motives.

Another potential limitation of this project was the timeframe. From start to finish, the timeline of this project was short and intense. More time may have allowed me to research volunteerism or to collect more input from the whole network; however, the short timeframe required me to wade through nonessential concepts, find the heart of the matter, and focus on what could best benefit CYN.

Moreover, while the timeline of this project was short, it was also realistic. Real professional planning projects do not operate on an academic semester schedule, and although the deadlines of this project were academic based, these dates could easily have been deadlines set by a client.

## COMMUNITY & REGIONAL PLANNING

The intent of this project was to develop a social and community plan for CYN. A planning tool commonly used in Canada, a social and community plan describes the community, summarizes the key issues facing the

community, and recommends strategies to minimize the issues and strengthen the community (Bathurst Regional Council, 2011). Unfortunately, the comprehensiveness of CYN's social and community plan was limited due to the realization that CYN needed to redefine its purpose. While it is helpful to CYN to know that many of its community issues stem from an unclear purpose, because of the unclear purpose, this project was limited to general, non-specific strategies. True to the social and community plan concept, though, this project at the very least, resulted in research that the CYN network can use to ensure the sustainability and continued success of the network, no matter how it decides to evolve.

### **(Virtual) Community & Regional Planning**

This project also presents unique perspective in community and regional planning. With virtual communities being a relatively new concept, very little planning work has focused on virtual community planning concepts, such as virtual community development. However, given today's technology-based society, virtual community planning may soon become the next area of focus in community and regional planning.





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## appendix a

# THE STORY OF UNITE NEBRASKA

In the UNITE Nebraska final report, Joe Gerstandt (2011) explains how the UNITE Nebraska event came to be:

At some point in 2009, two friends from different ends of Nebraska dreamed over dinner about the possibilities that exist for the future of their state. Jason Lauritsen, Omaha, and Marc Kaschke, North Platte, could envision tremendous opportunities for all parts of the state. But, they could also see that barriers existed to achieving this potential. It seemed to them that they lived in a state with an identity crisis and an apparent lack of sustained statewide collaboration and partnership. The agricultural and urban communities were flourishing independently and almost in spite of one another. For a lot of reasons, businesses, leaders and politicians didn't appear to be motivated or able to move through these barriers. So, as these two friends discussed these issues, the idea of UNITE Nebraska was born.

It was over a year before Jason and Marc would make two important connections that would move UNITE Nebraska from an idea to a reality. The first connection was to the Grand Island Chamber of Commerce and Mary Berlie. Mary and her colleagues embraced the idea of Unite and offered both their support and their community to host the event. The second connection was to Kayla Schnuelle at the University of Nebraska Rural Initiative. Kayla was the driving force behind the creation of the statewide effort, Connecting Young Nebraskans, and she immediately saw the potential of UNITE Nebraska to complement the work she was already doing. This small group then invited other passionate emerging leaders from across the state to join the movement.





## appendix b

# SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS SURVEY

### “General” Characteristics

1. What is your age range?

- Younger than 21
- 21-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36-40
- 41-45
- Older than 45

### Respondent Characteristics/Attributes for Tracking

1. How would you describe your primary area of employment?

- Entrepreneurship
- Private business
- Government agency
- Educational institution
- Economic development organization
- Non-profit organization or association
- Foundation
- Other

2. Please select the types of groups in which you would like to be more involved/active (respondents may select all that apply):

- Community groups
- Professional groups
- Leadership groups
- Personal development groups
- Civic/political groups
- Other

3. In what area of the state do you primarily live, work, interact, and play?

- Panhandle
- North
- Central
- Southwest
- South
- Southeast
- East
- Northeast

## Relational Questions

The list provided below on the left contains the names of all of the members of the CYN network (approximately 400 individuals). From this list, please select all those CYN members to whom you look for leadership, inspiration, or new ideas, as well as those with whom you have collaborated in the past or would like to collaborate with in the future. In addition, using the “Add” feature below on the right, please write in the names of individuals that are not currently on the CYN network member list, but that you look to for leadership, inspiration, new ideas, or collaboration, and then click the “+” button to add them to your list.

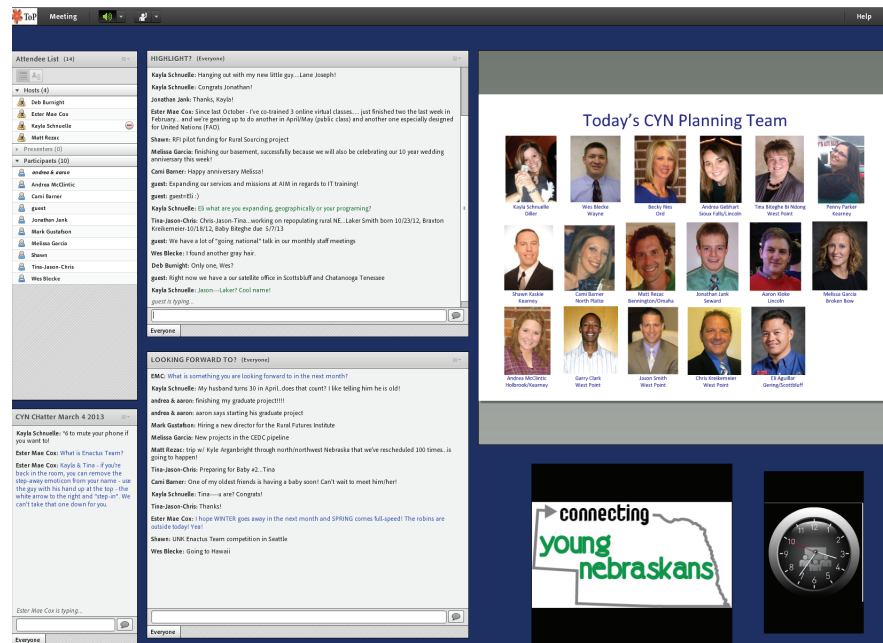
Please note that on the screen that follows, you will be asked to scroll through only YOUR list of identified names (CYN members you selected, as well as any non-members you added), and you will be required to identify each of those individuals in response to at least one of the five questions. Having respondents answer this broad question will narrow the number of choices they need to go through on the five substantive questions that follow, making survey completion more user-friendly.

1. Who energizes and inspires you? (motivation)
2. Who do you look to for leadership? (leadership)
3. Who have you worked with that has helped increase the success of your efforts? (awareness)
4. Who do you look to for new ideas and innovations? (influence)
5. Who would you like to collaborate with more? (opportunity)

# appendix c

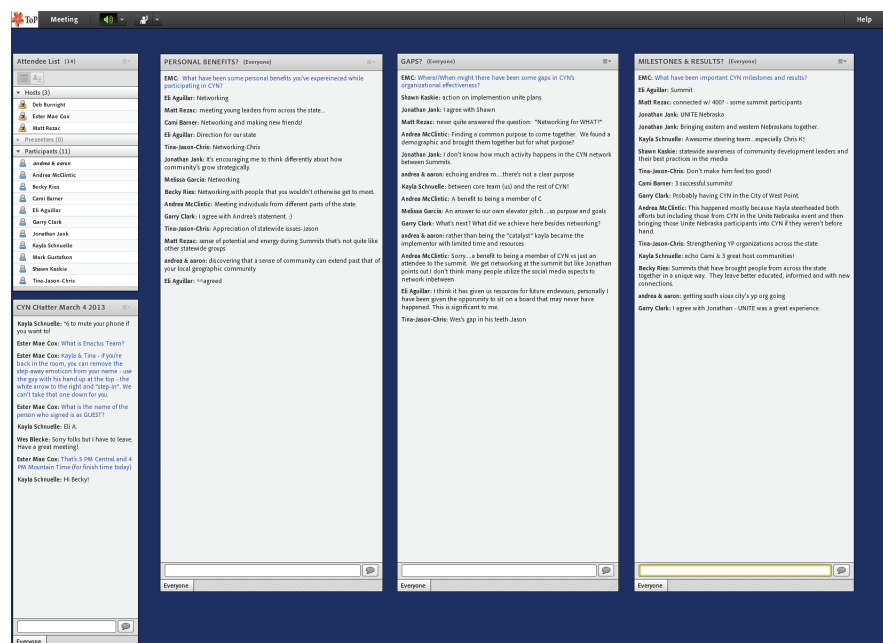
## SCREENSHOTS OF ADOBE CONNECT

Figure 13: March 4 facilitated model building, screenshot no. 1



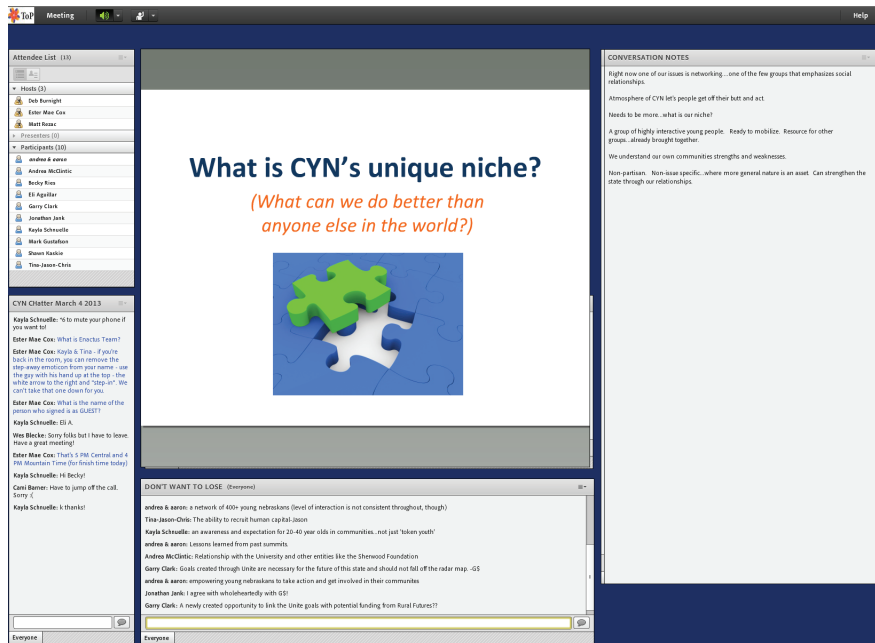
Note. Introductions were facilitated by chat boxes and pictures were pre-loaded of each participant to allow a more meaningful connection

Figure 14: March 4 facilitated model building, screenshot no. 2



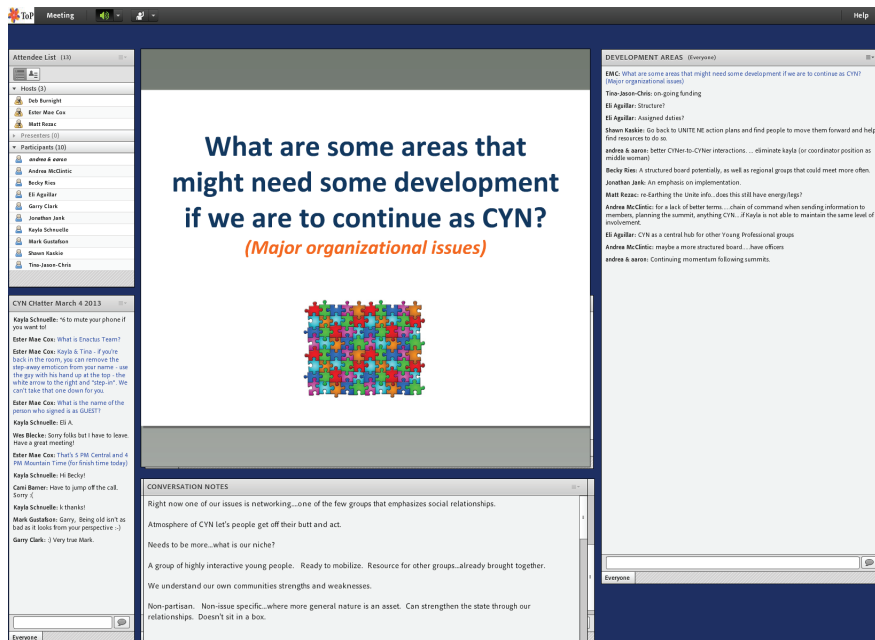
Note. Adobe Connect allows participants to contribute to the conversation by typing into chat boxes. Participants reflect on personal and professional benefits from CYN and also meaningful milestones.

**Figure 15: March 4 facilitated model building, screenshot no. 3**



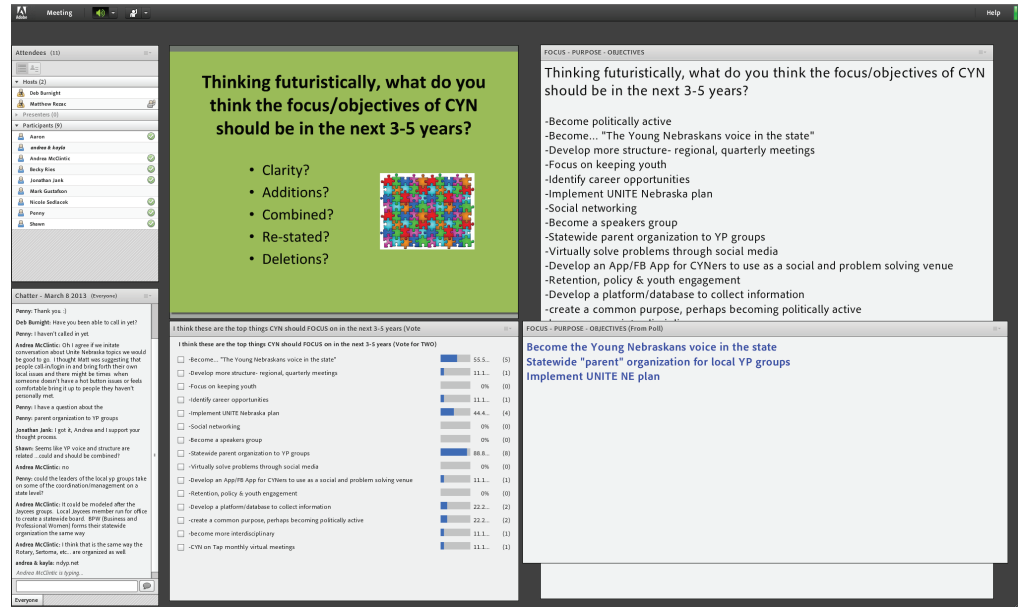
*Note.* With conversations occurring both vocally (through the phone) and textually (through Adobe Connect), the facilitators took on-screen notes throughout the facilitated model building exercise.

**Figure 16: March 4 facilitated model building, screenshot no. 4**



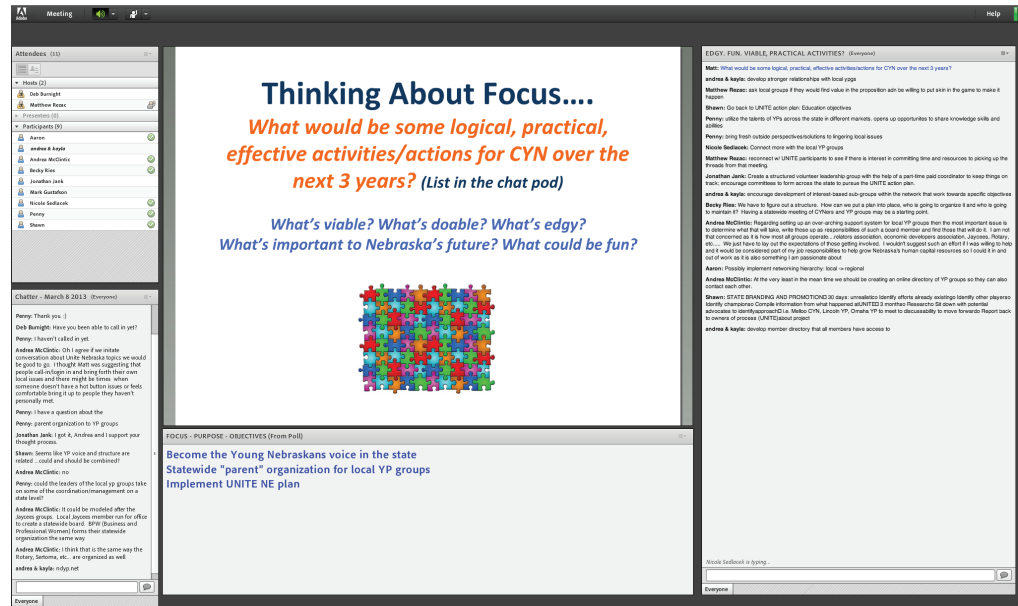
*Note.* With each main point of discussion, the Adobe Connect screen changed to reflect the change in topic, further helping facilitate the conversation.

**Figure 17: March 8 facilitated model building, screenshot no. 1**



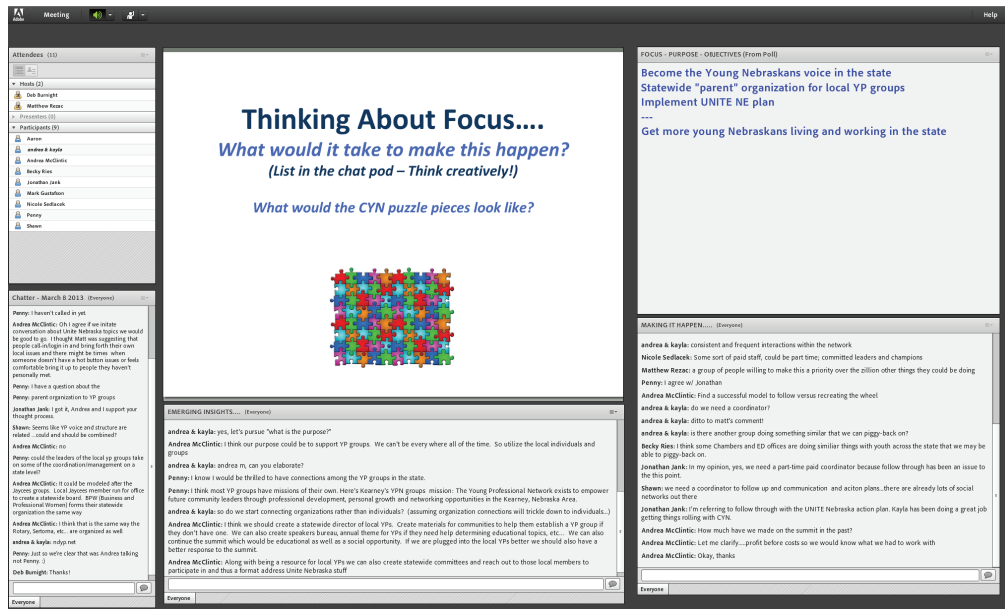
*Note.* In addition to chat boxes, the participants were also able to contribute to conversations through Adobe Connect's polling feature, which was used to obtain consensus on various pieces of the agenda.

**Figure 18: March 8 facilitated model building, screenshot no. 2**



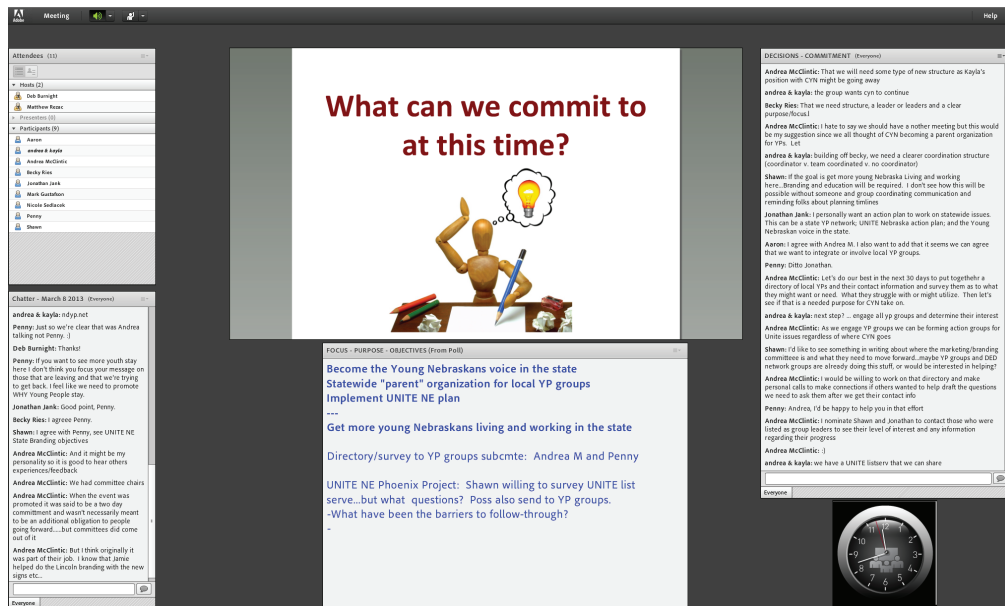
*Note.* Using the results from the poll conducted earlier in the session, the facilitators displayed the three priority items to help guide the conversation.

Figure 19: March 8 facilitated model building, screenshot no. 3



Note. The chat box feature of Adobe Connect helped keep participants engaged by allowing multiple conversations to occur simultaneously.

Figure 20: March 8 facilitated model building, screenshot no. 4



Note. At the end of the second session, the facilitators helped confirm next steps and commitments from the participants through on-screen notes.





