Study Circles build the grassroots capacities of communities. Study circles help communities create a vision for the future, identify local challenges and assets, and take productive next steps.

Overview
Study circles are small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions in which community members discuss and take action on a local problem or challenge. The Study Circles model was developed by Everyday Democracy.

According to Everyday Democracy:
“Dialogue-to-change programs [such as study circles] embody an approach to community change that puts small-group facilitated dialogue at the center. Dialogues work because they bring different kinds of people together around a public concern, and create a space that enables constructive, respectful conversation. They meet over time, and people develop trust and relationships, as well as a shared understanding of the issue under discussion.

The dialogues lead to a range of possible outcomes. Early on, organizers consider questions like “What are we hoping to accomplish? “What would success look like in our community?” and “How can we support the ideas that are generated through the dialogues?”

All kinds of change can result from a program:
- Changes in individual behaviors, beliefs and attitudes
- New relationships and networks
- Institutional changes
- Changes in public policy”

Purpose
The study circle model of dialogue enables people to share diverse perspectives in a supportive environment. Over time, the approach builds trust as well as community capacity for collective action, leading to feasible next steps with broad support.

Participation
Participation should be as broad and representative as possible. There is no minimum or maximum number of participants. To optimize dialogue, each study circle should have about six to 12 people.

Expected Outcomes
Study circles can:
- Empower community stakeholders to speak out about local challenges and opportunities.
- Develop people's facilitation and leadership skills.
- Generate political will for positive change.
- Help identify and invest in emerging community leaders.
- Build action groups ready to create and advocate for positive change.

Level of Effort and Phasing
With the goal of broad and representative participation in mind, advertising, organizing and supporting a study circle can take time. The entire process may take about 12 to 18 months, with action groups as an ongoing community effort after that. There are resources available. For example, a community can use an off-the-shelf discussion guide such as those provided by the Everyday Democracy organization (www.everyday-democracy.org/en/DiscussionGuides.aspx).

Tool Customization
Study circles can be tailored in many ways, including by:
- Topic: Study circles can address most issues facing communities, including environmental, public health, economic and social challenges.
- Scale: Study circles can look at issues affecting an entire community or region or focus in at the neighborhood level.

Connecting Dialog to Change
When getting started, it’s often helpful to think about programs in three phases:

- **Comprehensive community organizing** (team development, planning, recruitment)
- **Dialogue** (sometimes called study circles)
- **Change** (personal, collective and policy-level change)

Situation

The Twin Counties Region has a rich, shared history as well as present-day economic and political ties that weave together residents of cities, towns and rural areas in a shared destiny. The region is a special place to live, work and play. It has many wonderful community assets upon which a vibrant and sustainable future can be built.

However, the past 10 years have been difficult for the area. The region was devastated by flooding from Hurricane Floyd in September 1999. The region also lost its textile manufacturing industries and tobacco production has declined significantly. Urban neighborhoods show evidence of decline; many homes are boarded up. In October 2010, Forbes magazine listed the Rocky Mount Metropolitan Statistical Area as one of the 10 most impoverished cities in America.

In addition, the region has struggled with a lack of regional identity rooted in the historic divides between Nash and Edgecombe Counties. Although Rocky Mount straddles the county line, it is not the county seat for either jurisdiction. The population of Edgecombe County is mostly black. The population of Nash County is mostly white. Historic patterns of segregation and discrimination have contributed to disparities in living conditions, education and health outcomes, and investments in development between the two counties.

Approach

In response to the Forbes article, the City of Rocky Mount joined with Nash and Edgecombe Counties to fund the Twin Counties Visioning and Strategic Plan Process. This process is based on the dialogue-to-action model of change developed by Everyday Democracy. They selected the approach based on a desire to involve many citizens in developing a shared vision and set of priorities for the future of the regional community.

As illustrated in the process diagram below, community members engaged in visioning and dialogue through Study Circles that were facilitated by local facilitators. Action Groups composed of community members, many of whom went through the study circle process, are now developing strategic plans. These Action Groups will be responsible for shepherding implementation of their recommendations.

Outcomes and Ongoing Work

Using Everyday Democracy’s Web tools for developing discussion guides, the project team developed a discussion guide tailored to the issues and challenges facing the Twin Counties Region. The guide helped foster dialogue during the first phase of the project. The project is now in its second phase. Action groups are actively meeting to develop a strategic plan and shepherd implementation based on the priorities identified through the study circle process. Additional outcomes are described in the diagram below.

Twin Counties Visioning and Strategic Plan Process

For more information, visit the project website: http://twincountiesvisioning.skeo.com

Everyday Democracy is an organization that helps local communities explore ways for all kinds of people to think, talk and work together to solve problems. Building on the real-life challenges and successes of communities, Everyday Democracy creates flexible tools and processes that are widely used and adapted in the United States and beyond. For more information: www.everyday-democracy.org

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