

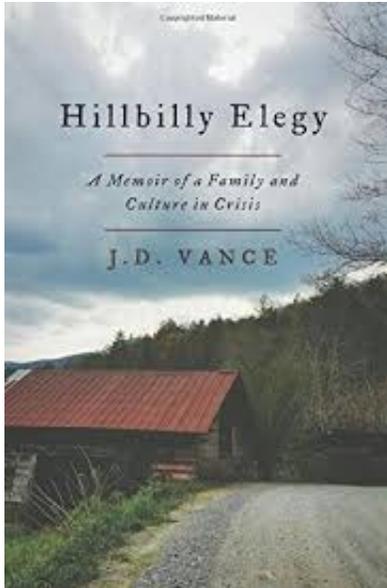


County Manager Visits: A New Wrinkle

Author : Mike Smith

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Last week I visited with two county managers—Steve Garrison in Rutherford County and Ashely Wooten in McDowell County. As with all of my manager visits, I thanked them for paying their membership dues and for their support. Both of the managers offered high praise for all of the services they get from the School—and as usual they highlighted the critical importance of our just-in-time advising. They emphasized how much their colleagues depend on us.

Rutherford and McDowell have been hit hard by the general economic dislocations that have affected many parts of North Carolina. The decline in textile and furniture manufacturing has caused the loss of many good jobs. At one point a few years ago the unemployment rate in Rutherford County was a staggering 16%, and the poverty rate in McDowell County stands at 20%. Those stories unfortunately have been repeated in many other North Carolina counties.

Here is the new wrinkle that surprised me. When I asked about the challenges facing their counties, both managers said exactly the same thing—employers are having trouble finding people who want to work. They were not saying that people wanted to work but just didn't have the necessary skills, the so-called skills gap. No doubt that is a part of the challenge. Instead, companies are telling them that they cannot find enough people who are *willing* to work at available



good-paying jobs.

The timing was interesting because I had just finished reading a new book that may offer a partial explanation for the phenomenon described by the employers in Rutherford and McDowell counties—*Hillbilly Elegy—A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance. Vance is a self-described “Scots-Irish hillbilly” who comes from a long line of working-class people in Appalachian Kentucky. He argues that the loss of manufacturing jobs accounts for only part of the challenge facing many working-class whites—the focus of his book. Vance describes a culture that reacts “to bad circumstances in the worst way possible. It’s about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it.” People feel that they have little control over their lives and so they blame everyone but themselves.

Vance offers the following anecdote to illustrate his point. He worked in a medium-sized floor tile distribution business near his hometown the summer before attending Yale Law School. The job involved loading heavy boxes of tile onto shipping pallets. A 19-year-old guy started in the warehouse a few months before Vance. The guy’s girlfriend was pregnant and the manager offered her a clerical position answering phones. Both of them were terrible workers—they missed lots of work without notice, were chronically late, and had horrible work habits. When they were fired, the guy blamed the manager and lashed out at him. Vance saw at least two other people



lose their jobs at the warehouse under similar circumstances during that same summer.

Hillbilly Elegy is really two books. One is an inspirational and oftentimes hilarious personal memoir about Vance's family and his remarkable personal journey. His grandmother—Mamaw—is someone who personifies the working-class values of loyalty, self-reliance, and hard work. She's tough as nails, swears worse than any sailor, and carries a gun in her housecoat. It was Vance's good fortune to come under her influence and have his values shaped by her values. The other book is a vivid story about the challenges facing poor whites and "what the problem feels like when you were born with it hanging around your neck." Vance is not presenting an academic study, though he quotes William Julius Wilson and other scholars to support some of his points. Nor is he arguing that working-class whites "deserve more sympathy than other folks." The book is about the impact of class and family, and I was surprised to learn that surveys have found "working-class whites are the most pessimistic group in America."

The two county managers mentioned the cultural impact of qualified workers who don't want to work because they see it as an economic development issue. The managers worry that it will be difficult to recruit manufacturing companies to their counties if it continues. Vance argues that a lot of the answer requires that families and community institutions support one another and reinforce values of self-reliance. He was lucky enough to live with his Mamaw who repeatedly told him "[n]ever to be like these f****ing losers who think the deck is stacked against them. You can do anything you want to." He also says that "[p]ublic policy can help, but there is no government that can fix these problems for us."

I don't know if there is a role for the School or the University in trying to figure out a way to contribute something in communities facing this serious challenge. It is a big so-called "wicked" problem, which often seems to be another way of saying there is nothing to be done. Vance is right that government can't fix the problem. But there must be some role for government. This issue is plaguing many of our rural counties and I wanted to raise it because these two county managers mentioned it so prominently in my visits with them.