

From Classroom to Community: A Rural Studies Class Project of Community Redevelopment

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Abstract

As part of a new Rural Studies bachelor's degree program, students in an Introduction to Rural Studies course engages in a service learning project as part of the curriculum. Students work with leaders in a struggling rural Georgia community on redevelopment projects. The outcome from the reinvestment is both inspiring and encouraging to community leaders.

Keywords: education programs, rural studies, Georgia, service learning

1.0 Case Study

In the fall of 2009, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton, Georgia, launched the first undergraduate Rural Studies baccalaureate degree program in the United States. Though discipline-specific graduate programs related to Rural Studies exist at several universities, and Brandon University in Canada and others in the United Kingdom offer Rural Studies degrees for undergraduates, the ABAC Rural Studies program is the first to offer students the opportunity of selecting a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science degree in the interdisciplinary program with emphases in Business and Economic Development, Arts and Culture, Social and Community Affairs, and Writing and Communication (for more information, see www.abac.edu/ruralstudies/). As part of the curriculum, all students must complete a core of nine common courses in the area of Rural Studies; five courses in their areas of concentration; four course electives that may come from any area of the other concentrations; an internship in the student's concentration; and a capstone course designed to synthesize discipline and concentration knowledge into a project at the end of the program of study.

As a springboard into Rural Studies, the first class of juniors took Introduction to Rural Studies, one of the common core requirements and an overview of issues and information from the field. The course was designed essentially as a seminar that allowed students to lead discussion on some days and to participate with peers on other days. Guest speakers from each area of concentration augmented the seminar; these guests included local Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Development Authority professionals involved in revitalization efforts, a Hispanic

rural artist from California, a well-known rural Georgia author, and several university extension leaders who work with rural communities all over the state of Georgia in areas representative of the program concentrations.

As a significant requirement for the course, students were assigned a group service learning project that involved conducting a needs assessment report in either rural economic, cultural, or social development in a local community. The goals of the project were serial: to give students an opportunity to meet with community leaders to determine local needs and interests, to give them experience with filtering needs to identifiable projects that had a strong likelihood of completion given appropriate resources and management, and to provide a public platform for students to present their findings in a real-world setting where stakeholders might take some of their plans and implement them through community action and development. In keeping with best practices, we designed a project that would be a significant learning experience with a positive outcome for the students and the target community (Eyler, Giles, & Giles, 1999). The philosophy behind service learning is two-fold: to provide a significant contribution to a community, people, group, or organization while at the same time giving students real work experience that will reinforce course content and exercises, enhance resumes, and broaden employment skills. Too often, service learning projects have a tendency to devolve into community service that, while providing positive outcomes for a community, do little to enhance marketplace, hands-on experience for students. Historically, service learning has not been a focus of the institution, but we decided to pilot a significant project and, if it proved successful, to launch a wider initiative across the Rural Studies curriculum.

Obviously, given the time constraints, the project was not considered to be the depth or scope of a professional study, but was to mirror as closely as possible the work experience students will face after graduation and to develop awareness of the essential teamwork required to bring communities together to solve problems in an ethical and efficient manner. In moving from classroom to community, the students were put in a complex situation that forced them to develop research skills, enhance and rely on critical thinking to analyze issues outside the security of the classroom, and advance research skills within the real-life community laboratory of development activities. The project was divided into three components: a proposal that outlined the project, research for the project, and a final report and presentation for community leaders with proposed solutions to identified problems garnered from students' research. Students submitted portfolios of all their work at the end of the semester that included their reflections on the project and the learning experience. These portfolios also allow for course and program assessment by internal and external college reviewers.

We selected Telfair County, Georgia, on which to focus the students' group projects. Several factors determined the intentional selection of this particular community. First, Telfair County lies in close proximity to the college (roughly 70 miles), allowing for half-day trips for faculty and students to meet with community leaders and to conduct research. Telfair County covers roughly 440 square miles and has only 11,000 citizens. Within its borders are six small towns: Helena, McCrae, Scotland, Milan, Lumber City, and Jacksonville. The unemployment rate is among the highest in the state of Georgia at 15.4% for Telfair compared to the state average of 10.5% (Georgia Department of Labor, 2009); and twenty percent of all citizens live below the poverty line (Georgia.gov, 2009; Telfair Chamber of

Commerce, 2009; University of Georgia, 2009). Furthermore, the county has had a marked decrease in population, not from a major loss of jobs, though the county hospital closed, but because of out-migration, commonly referred to as the “rural brain drain” (Carr & Kefalus, 2009). The closing of the hospital, too, has been significant and is indicative of the social and cultural health of the community; tragically, it replicates what happens time and again in rural communities that lose hospitals because they have “comparatively less technologically sophisticated equipment and strained budgets, which [make] it difficult for them to compete with urban hospitals or to be able to purchase the ever-expanding array of technical and biomedical innovations” (Morton, 2003). Importantly, the medical situation is emblematic of the loss of many other critical-need services in rural areas and crystallizes the economic and social situation of Telfair County.

Before sending students to meet with community leaders, and working through the local Chamber of Commerce president, we made the trip ourselves to open preliminary discussions about the desirability and feasibility of using the county as a locus for the assignment and to determine whether community leaders, several of whom attended this meeting, were receptive to having the students work in the area. A pervasive theme of the text we chose for the class, and our guiding principle, was “the belief that civic engagement, civility, inclusiveness, and democracy are necessary framing principles for effective rural development” (Brown & Swanson, 2003). Happily, we were met with great enthusiasm from all parties. After a couple of hours, several possible areas of need and interest began to emerge that seemed likely to garner student interest and that would definitely separate into appropriate areas of curricular concentration.

As noted, the course content focused in an introductory manner on a wide-range of issues important to rural studies, from education to religion to healthcare, and more. In the fourth week of the semester, we returned with students to meet with the Chamber of Commerce president and the same local leaders. By this time, students were reasonably familiar with the language of the Rural Studies discipline and were beginning to develop a grasp of the scope of issues that most rural areas face. From our initial meeting to returning with the students, the local group had also focused their thinking on needs of the community and areas where they would like for students to concentrate their research. Over the course of conversation, three distinct issues emerged that students and local leaders agreed upon for further consideration: renovation of an old school building that arts leaders have been trying for years to recreate as a community arts center, a plan to increase tourism, and downtown redevelopment.

With the initial meeting over, students became excited about the possibilities of “saving” Telfair County, though we reiterated time and again “saving” a community would take years of difficult work and was beyond the purview of their assigned tasks. They wanted to undertake the largest possible projects, create and lead community volunteer ventures, find large revenue sources, and so on. Their enthusiasm was without parallel. Our goals were more modest; we wanted students to identify projects that fell into the realm of reality, where they could see some immediate and short-term success that could likely be parlayed into long-term, sustainable development. We also wanted them to produce hard-copy and electronic deliverables for community leaders that could serve as a working library at the start of their own projects. In other words, we wanted them to remain as idealistic as possible, but at the same time to leave the community with real,

concrete ideas and information that would allow them to pursue their own projects with success. Slowly students had to learn how to help the community help itself. They still had visions of elaborate community service projects that are worthwhile and make a big, short term difference, but rarely provide training and resources that allow for long-term improvement of a given situation. As noted in Moseley's case study (2003, pp. 53-5), the Muurevesi College of Agriculture and Horticulture in Finland conducted a training program for fruit and berry farmers in order to launch a new wine industry. At the heart of this program was the philosophy of beginning with the resources a community has available, being creative, and giving birth to entrepreneurship, a philosophy that we discussed with Telfair leaders, given that it was unlikely new industry would come courting in an economic downturn.

On their own, students returned to the community for field research throughout the rest of the semester. Working in groups of about five (we had 15 students in the class), projects of manageable scope gradually emerged. Students understood well that "amenity-based development is simply not a realistic option for many rural areas. In many locales the kinds of natural features needed to attract tourism or other amenity-based activities are not present. Also, many rural areas that do exhibit certain amenity characteristics still find it very difficult to capitalize on those features due to locational disadvantages (e.g., being in very remote and hard-to-access settings) or an inability to compete effectively with other areas that have even greater amenity resource endowments" (Krannich & Petrzalka, 2003).

Working from the areas of interest of the community leaders, groups decided to focus on fundraising events to offset completion of the auditorium and ground floor of the old school and identifying appropriate programming opportunities once the restoration was complete; using the state park and three waterways as a focal point for tourism; and methods of creating a unified approach to local economic development for the county by including all the towns within this one county rather than simply the county seat. What students quickly realized was that the projects were not separate entities, but related in fundamental ways. Certainly each project had independent requirements and areas of focus, but at base all were joined in community and economic development. This reality was a strong life lesson for students to carry into their careers. With some notable exceptions, and typical of most community planning and development projects, all endeavors would compete for the same resources, money, and local personnel. The need for cooperation emerged quickly, as well as the need to overlap tasks required from local volunteers or paid professionals to streamline the efficiency of all projects.

At the end of the term, we returned a final time as a group to Telfair County. By this point, students had come to understand that their task was to identify specific areas where they could offer assistance, resources for financing projects, and realistic short-term and long-term projects for local leadership and volunteers to accomplish. They had also tamed their own natural affinity for the area and assumed the mandate that every project must be underpinned with an infrastructure of fiscal and human resources to assure success. In light of Johnson's observation that areas rich in natural resources are attractive for in-migration, and that newcomers will have expectations of services, students realized that their focus must necessarily divide between the people they were working with and for and potential visitors or newcomers who would need to be "sold" on the community because they likely would not have developed a natural affinity for it—at least not

initially (Johnson, 2003). They were also mindful that “If rural areas are to be attractive to individuals and firms in the future, the environmental quality of rural places must not be destroyed” (Castle, 1999, p. 628). Each group was instructed to prepare a public presentation of their findings for the community leaders in Telfair County, a compendium of grant resources appropriate to each project, and any other physical deliverable they could leave at the table.

For the final presentation, the Chamber president had pulled together a larger local group than had initially worked with the students. In attendance were mayors from five of the six communities in the county, the president of the historical society, the president of the Arts Society, a county commissioner, two representatives from the Downtown Development Authority, a representative from the Georgia Department of Economic Development, two citizen observers, and the local press. Other faculty members from the Rural Studies program and the college president also attended. Students were responsible for collecting all hardware for their presentations to include back-up laptop computers, projectors, and screens. Given the poverty of the county, they did not make any assumption about the availability of technology; their foresight was excellent, as none was provided or available.

Groups had rehearsed their presentations before the class and received strict critiques on content, visual impact, quality of documents to leave in the community, and professionalism. After the critique, they had time for revision as necessary. Accordingly, the presentations went smoothly. The group that worked on the plans for the auditorium provided

- Multiple examples of appropriate fundraising projects for general and targeted audiences
- Sample flyers/posters appropriate to use as advertisement
- Contact information for professionals and volunteers in other communities who had engaged in similar fundraisers (along with their outcomes)
- Suggestions for programming appropriate to general or targeted audiences
- A compendium of grants opportunities available for such renovation projects
- A template that would be appropriate with minor revisions for nearly any grant the community might apply for.

In the beginning, the students had wanted to engage in a clean-up day for the auditorium themselves as a means of jumpstarting the project; time was not conducive to this project given the distance and varying student schedules. Instead, and in keeping with true service learning outcomes, they created a plan for a community volunteer day, along with local fundraising projects aided by in-kind services, such as having local contractors and building supply businesses provide materials and expertise to community volunteers involved in the clean-up and repair. An unexpected by-product of the students’ early enthusiasm was that the community actually completed the installation of seats in the theatre, a project that had been on hold for several years while they awaited funding for external help.

The group working on unified county development

- Presented examples of community building projects that would lead to cohesion among the small towns in the county rather than the factionalism and rivalry that has been a historical reality

- Determined that a community survey of needs within county locales was an immediate and critical necessity and created an extensive example that community leaders could tailor for particular projects
- Identified specific school groups to help conduct different parts of the surveys, realizing that using local public school students would be a unifying element for the area since all schools are consolidated and meet in the county seat
- Located funding sources that support targeted school group volunteer activities (for example, 4-H, FFA and FBLA, and others)
- Provided contact information and dossiers for university, state, and federal agencies that work with similar communities and projects associated with redevelopment and renovation
- Identified potential grant sources for such projects.

The group focusing on tourism engaged in extensive field research before identifying the lake at the nearby state park and the three rivers as a source for potential tourism. They

- Conducted local research to identify maps, amenities, places and events of historical significance for all areas of the community, as well as critical contact information for each town within the county
- Created a magazine template for collation of all research data gathered, providing the entire layout from advertising to lists of community businesses and their contact information, to pictures and text with information about water activities in the area
- Donated original artwork made by one of the students to serve as they cover for the magazine
- Collected production estimates and contact information for a myriad of printers in the South Georgia area
- Identified all overlap or dovetail points among the three projects that emerged as the students worked throughout the semester, thereby saving valuable time and creating greater efficiency for local group projects
- Published a compendium of all funding resources and potential grants, along with the template for most grant applications, collected by students. This document added significantly to the library of materials the students left with the community leaders.

Students began their projects with full knowledge that they were completing an academic assignment for which they would ultimately receive a grade; they quickly adopted a business-like stance toward their work that will serve them well in professional careers. They channeled idealism into practical, achievable outcomes that provided Telfair County with valuable resources as they move forward with their own steps toward revitalization. At the end of the community presentations, the college president asserted that “Our mission in developing the Rural Studies program is to educate young people on the uniqueness, value, and opportunities of the rural communities. We want to see each of these projects through, hopefully through internships and future class projects. This is not the end of the partnership.” In a two-month follow-up with us, the Telfair County Chamber

of Commerce president said, “Folks are still buzzing about it. Thank you so very much for the inspiration and encouragement that you all have given Telfair.”

The course met our expectations in many ways. Our experience confirmed for us the value and design of the program and certainly its value to rural communities. We realized that our plan to place interns in communities was sound and that these communities would value and employ our graduates. We designed the course to run as a seminar, much as our own graduate seminars were designed. Small groups of students were responsible for leading discussion each day; they posted response papers on class readings, responded to the essays of others, and wrote a comprehensive final exam. On reflection, in future we would revise the seminar approach to instruction in this course because we found it too sophisticated for first semester juniors, though the experience was invaluable for them. We were completely satisfied with the service learning component of the course and have determined to expand this approach to teaching not only in other Rural Studies courses but into other courses we teach as well.

In their own reflections on the value of engaging in this service learning project, all students evaluated essential parts of their work and the work of their peers, but most also looked to the future. Representative of these musings are comments such as, “After I graduate, I honestly have no clue what I am going to do, but community development would be a great fit for me; I have given that kind of work a lot of consideration....I want to be able to work on projects like the Telfair Project. To me, that is the best way to give back to the rural areas that I was raised in and love.” A nontraditional student who already has a fulltime job, commented, “When I graduate with my Rural Studies degree, I will have the skills, understanding and breadth of experience to hopefully serve as a resource (on a volunteer basis) to different local groups such as the Arts Connection [our local umbrella organization for area arts and festival planning] or the Planning and Zoning Commission. I hope to use the information learned [from this project] to better my community through service and bring different a perspective to community committees I may serve on.” Another student wrote, “By going into small rural communities such as Telfair and preserving the current infrastructure while developing it for creative reuse, I hope to help revive communities that have been overlooked for generations. [I want to help] inspire a rebirth of such rural communities.” Other comments were similar, and all brought together essentials for the success of any community—expertise and service. The ultimate test of how much students took away from the experience will manifest in the future as they move into their careers and get on with their lives. Daryl Hobbs, coeditor of the first volume in a series on rural America published by the Rural Sociological Society, observes that “when you’ve seen *one* rural community, you have seen *one* rural community” (as cited in Brown et al., 2003, p.397). Students’ replication of similar projects or future engagement with their communities will assert the success they achieved in this one rural community.

2.0 References

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