

Journal of Rural and Community Development

How to Revitalize a Small Rural Town? An Empirical Study of Factors for Success. University-Community Collaboration with a Small Historic Rural Tourism Town

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Citation:

Grunwell, S., & Ha, I. S. (2014). How to revitalize a small rural town? An empirical study of factors for success. University-community collaboration with a small historic rural tourism town. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 9(2), 32-50.

Publisher: Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor: Dr. Doug Ramsey

Issue Dedication:

This issue of the JRCD is dedicated to Cheryl Williams who passed away suddenly in 2010. She was in the first semester of her PhD program in Nursing at the University of Saskatchewan at the time of her death. Her co-authored paper in this issue is based on her master's thesis research. Pammla Petrucka was Cheryl's advisor. It was Pammla's wish to publish this peer-reviewed article in honour of Cheryl's work and her family.

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How to Revitalize a Small Rural Town? An Empirical Study of Factors for Success. University-Community Collaboration with a Small Historic Rural Tourism Town

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Abstract

Since the 2008 downturn in the economy many small rural towns and their business owners have struggled to survive, especially if tourism has been their key economic driver. As a result, many communities are engaged in revitalization efforts to renew and restore their town to its former prominence as a viable community economically. This article examines the strategies and benefits of the formation of a university-community partnership formed to assist a small historic rural tourism town in the southern Appalachian region of the United States that has suffered significantly since the 2008 recession, and the collaboration efforts undertaken to assist town officials in revitalizing their community. The article also discusses revitalization efforts being taken by the town.

Keywords: rural towns, small towns, rural tourism towns, rural development, universities-community partnership

1.0 Introduction

Many small rural towns and businesses that relied heavily on tourism as their key economic driver, suffered severely from the 2008 downturn in the economy. Since the 2008 downturn in the economy many small rural towns and their business owners have struggled to survive, especially if tourism has been their key economic driver. For many such towns and businesses that have relied heavily on their tourism draw, an examination and restructuring of their product offerings, business operations, marketing strategies and target markets, may be necessary to survive the changing economy and market dynamics. One such destination that has struggled since the downturn in the economy, is the small rural heritage tourist town of Dillsboro, North Carolina, located in the southern Appalachian region of the United States. Due to difficult economic times, the loss of a major historical tourism attraction, and a downturn in tourism, a number of businesses have closed and others continue to struggle to stay open.

Dillsboro has been a popular tourist town since 1886 when visitors began to arrive by train and spend several weeks there. Dillsboro's draw for nearly a century has been its quaint charm, country inns, tourist shops, the original general store, local artisans and crafts people, galleries, and a few restaurants. Its downtown center consists of five square blocks and is just two blocks long. The primary employment sectors are: education services, and health care and social assistance; arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services; and public administration. In 2012, Dillsboro, NC, had 110 households with an average household size of 2.20 people with a population of 249 residents. The size of the labor force was 100 people (city-data.com). Dillsboro's population has declined over the years, mostly due to little new housing being built within the town limits and the fact that many homes were turned into shops in the downtown area. The median resident age is 47.5 years, the median household income is \$33,543, and unemployment is 8.0% compared to 3.7% before the economic downturn and the loss of the Great Smoky Mountain Railroad depot (city-data.com). Dillsboro is 50 miles from the nearest metropolitan center, 1.4 miles from the county seat town, and 8.4 miles from a university with 10,000 students, 450 faculty, and 260 staff members. The nearest competitions to Dillsboro in terms of the town's role as a tourism destination are in towns 15-20 miles away in neighboring counties.

In addition to the devastating effects that the 2008 in the economy had on the town of Dillsboro, a major historical tourism attraction, namely the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad (GSMR), a member of the American Heritage Railways, pulled its operation out of Dillsboro that same year. The results of these two traumas on the town resulted in nearly 50% of the 62 businesses closing from 2008 – 2011 (34 businesses closed) and a decrease in businesses sales volume ranging from 22% to 60% according to the Dillsboro Business Merchant Associations. As the primary attraction draw to the area for twenty years, the GSMR provided a degree of financial certainty to the townspeople and business owners of Dillsboro. Dillsboro served as the headquarters for the GSMR until 2008, approximately 60,000 people a year rode the train, and Dillsboro boomed according to the ("Money Available", 2011). An economic study conducted in 2007 for the GSMR (Grunwell & Ha, 2011) revealed that the heritage railway attraction contributed significantly to the regional economy and provided excellent value for the services rendered based on visitor satisfaction ratings. It was also a powerful economic entity for creating jobs, opening of new businesses, and generating income and tax revenue. Furthermore it helped diversify the town's tourism offerings, enhanced its uniqueness and revitalized its tourism industry (Grunwell & Ha, 2011).

When the GSMR pulled its operation out of Dillsboro, the town's economy suffered a substantial loss, tourism declined significantly, and the large depot building has since sat empty. People lost jobs, stores lost money, and businesses went elsewhere. According to the Dillsboro Business Merchants Association, the town indirectly lost 44 jobs as a result of the GSMR moving its operation out of Dillsboro. It left 22 full-time railroad employees and a handful of part-time workers stranded. The reason given for the move by the GSMR was a more central location for the various routes, more town parking, and it was also the town where they had built their train museum twenty years ago, when they first began operation in Dillsboro. As cited in a study done for Dillsboro by the Magellan Strategy consulting firm (2008, p. 2):

Dillsboro needs to chart a direction for future tourism success that may or may not include the railroad. Regardless of whether the GSMR ever returns

to Dillsboro, the town will be much better prepared and responsible for its own future without such great dependence upon one entity.

However, as the results from this study revealed the three groups of constituents researched encouraged the town to find a way to bring the train back.

As the town's economy continued to suffer, the town leaders sought outside advisory assistance from the nearby university. At the fall 2009 general faculty session, Western Carolina University's chancellor announced that the small rural town of Dillsboro was seeking university assistance in the revitalization process for the town. This resulted in the creation of the University-Community Partnership, a university-wide effort designed to match faculty expertise and resources with Dillsboro's challenges and needs. An outgrowth of the revitalization partnership was a progression of meetings with town officials to determine their needs and how the university could best be of assistance in the revitalization process. As cited by Seifer & Carriere (2003), community-university partnerships are gaining momentum across the country as a powerful force for revitalizing communities.

One of the group's first tasks was to develop a mission statement for the partnership. The committee agreed to the following: Dillsboro, with assistance from the university, will improve the quality of life for its residents, the economic prospects for its businesses, and the opportunity for enjoyment for its visitors while preserving the town's unique historic character. The group then identified several objectives it believed could be achieved in the immediate future (before tackling what they felt were some of the more challenging long-term objectives), a comprehensive marketing plan, small business development plans, and increased entertainment activities.

The partnership town members consisted of the town planning commission, the town major, and select business owners. The university members consisted of the chancellor, the Small Business and Technology Development Center, the Public Policy Institute, and faculty from a variety of program areas including: the arts, communications, economics, entrepreneurship, hospitality and tourism, marketing, natural resources, and public policy. Students from these various disciplines were also engaged in the process, through an array of experiential learning projects.

2.0 Purpose of this Study

This paper will examine the benefits of partnership collaboration between a university and a rural historic tourism small town, which sought assistance from the university for the purpose of revitalizing their town after the 2008 economic recession and the loss of a major tourism attraction in the town. The focus will be on the results of a series of surveys requested by the town leaders for which the purpose of the surveys was to provide feedback to the town for evaluating current operations and making improvements for the future.

3.0 Literature Review

Many communities across America are finding it necessary to revitalize their towns to insure economic health and quality of life in a community. Revitalization has been occurring at a rapid pace in many communities across the USA for decades (Roth, 2011). Over the past few decades there have been a number of societal initiatives to assist communities of small towns, rural towns, tourism towns, urban downtowns, and university towns with developing strategies necessary for survival and economic

growth. These initiatives have occurred at all levels in society – local, state and national, through various avenues including governments, corporations, entrepreneurs, university institutions, and community leaders. Amirkhanian & Habiby (2003) outlined strategies that incorporate the role of universities, local governments, communities, and business leaders, suggesting each stakeholder has a role to play if successful co-existence and development efforts are to materialize. As cited by Merriman (2009) the overriding goal is to create a stable and economically healthy town that preserves the best of the town while simultaneously correcting problems that threaten its future sustainability.

A powerful force for revitalizing communities that is gaining momentum across the United States is university-community partnerships. Colleges and universities are collaborating with community groups to apply research, scholarship, and service to real-life problems. They are integrating such partnerships into their curriculum, academic studies, and student activities, making them part of their ongoing mission. America's colleges and universities have more intellectual talent than any other institution in society, and many of them are using these partnerships to tackle complex socio-economic issues facing the neighborhoods that surround them (Cuomo, 2003).

Universities are expected to contribute to their local communities. Such initiatives may include college students volunteering in neighborhood schools, faculty conducting research activities, or university leaders launching major community-development initiatives. Often these initiatives result in new knowledge for academia and transformative experiences for community members. (Anyon & Fernandez, 2007). The focus for university-community initiatives can be on helping the community, teaching or learning in the classroom. "These partnerships hold tremendous promise for generating innovative research, supporting community transformation, and training the next generation of leaders in the community and in academia" (Anyon & Fernandez, 2007, p. 45).

As cited by the www.community-wealth.org, in a discussion of university and community partnerships. Institutions of higher education have an obvious vested interest in building strong relationships with the communities that surround their campuses. They do not have the option of relocating and thus are of necessity place-based anchors ... Beginning in the 1980s, an expanding movement within higher education has been attempting to make universities more relevant and responsive to the communities and states in which they are located.

A higher education association, Campus Compact (www.compact.org) is a national coalition of almost 1,200 college and university presidents, who have committed "to helping catalyze and lead a national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education" (Boyte & Hollander, 1999, p. 14).

"To be successful, universities and their host communities must pursue collaborative strategies that result in mutually beneficial outcomes" (Roth, 2011, p.35). University leadership plays a key role in both determining the involvement of the university in the community and the community's attitude toward the university. When universities, local governments, and community leaders develop a collaborative approach to economic development, results have been positive with mutually beneficial outcomes. Community officials need to "incorporate universities in their economic development plans, and business and community leaders must look for

opportunities to partner with universities on projects that benefit a broad section of the community” (Roth, 2011, p. 37).

A number of universities are engaged in what has been coined ‘anchor institution work.’ Anchor institutions have the potential to be key engines of growth and revitalization in their communities. The University of Pennsylvania has developed a ‘Toolkit for Anchor Institutions’ to use as a guide to rebuild, revitalize, strengthen and improve their local communities. The toolkit aims to provide a guide to all anchor institutions; whether academic, medical, corporate or otherwise, to examine their roles in their community, to pose questions and seek answers on how to participate in neighborhood stabilization and revitalization. According to Sampson (2004, p. 4), anchors such as “universities have a critical role in securing America’s future innovation, economic competitiveness and prosperity in a global economy... universities must acknowledge economic development is part of their core mission.” Together, through collaboration, anchors and community organizations can build communities that are healthy places to live and work.

Often the struggling that many small towns have experienced has been the result of either a major business or attraction that has pulled operations out of the town, or nearby large retailers or malls steal trade from their towns. However, towns that are home to a university or have one nearby, have a revitalization advantage— provided they can collaborate with that institution (Roth, 2011). In communities near a university, the university is often seen as a necessary economic engine to foster development and growth (McGirr et al., 2003; Domahidy & Ward, 2004). It is clearly in the interests of universities to help their home towns prosper. If a university’s neighborhood is improved by the efforts of a community partnership initiative, the more appealing the university will be to prospective students and their parents (Amirkhanian & Habiby, 2003). Today in many cities and towns, universities have been realizing that their own success is tied to that of their neighbors, and have formed partnerships with their neighboring communities to drive revitalization. “The futures of institutions of higher education are inexorably tied to the health of their communities” (Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, 2002, p.4).

At a federal level, the Office of University Partnerships (OUP), which falls under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, facilitates the formation of campus-community partnerships that enable students, faculty, and neighborhood organizations to work together to revitalize the economy, generate jobs, and rebuild healthy communities. OUP strives to support and increase these collaborative efforts through grants, interactive conferences, and development-related research. Also at a national level, the U.S. Small Business Administration has an extensive network of field offices which mainly consists of university partners that are hosts to a Small Business and Development Center on their campus to provide assistance to small businesses at a regional level.

A new and deeper understanding of the educational importance of engagement is emerging. Leading scholars have shown that by strategically focusing higher education’s many resources – from academic programs and research to business practices – universities can improve their core intellectual and academic work – in part by giving students and faculty real-world experience which can impact both research and teaching (www.community-wealth.org) In 2006, these efforts achieved institutional recognition with the creation of a new elective by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, namely the classification for

Community Engagement, for which 300 colleges and universities had already qualified by 2010 (www.carnegiefoundation.org).

There are a number of university research institutes that have been established to offer assistance to communities and towns. A list of noted models and best practices of university and community partnerships in the U.S. are referenced at www.community-wealth.org. A few examples of U.S. university collaborative initiatives to provide assistance to communities are: the Rural Economic Development Center at University of North Carolina; the Morris Center for Small Towns at the University of Minnesota; the Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania; the Center for Economic and Community Development at Pennsylvania State University; the Building Sustainable Communities Initiative at the University of Idaho; the Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University; The Center of Community and Economic Development at Michigan State University; the Partnership for Community Development at Colgate University; the Institute for Urban and Regional Development at the University of California Berkeley; the Democracy Collaborative at University of Maryland; and the Center for Urban Initiatives and Research at the University of Wisconsin.

4.0 Methodology

Three questionnaires were developed at the request of the partnership town leaders in 2010 to survey: (1) town business owners, (2) university faculty/staff and students, and (3) visitors to the town. Development of each of the questionnaires was done through a series of meetings with the town's leaders before distributing to ensure the questions being asked were providing valuable information for future decision making. Each questionnaire was pilot tested before distribution to ensure questions were clear and information obtained was useful.

The business survey was mailed to the 60 town business owners. Overall, 33 business owners participated in the survey for a response rate of 55.0%. The university faculty/staff and students survey was administered through campus email using 'Qualtrics' web-based survey software. To encourage faculty and staff participation in the survey, the university chancellor sent out an email emphasizing participation would provide vital information to the town leaders and merchants on current operations and help determine the future direction of the town. To encourage student participation, their name was entered into a drawing to win prizes donated by some of the town merchants. Of the 1,168 questionnaires completed by the university community 47.4% were by faculty/staff (18.9% faculty, 28.5% staff) and 52.6% by students. The visitor survey was administered in person using the intercept survey method over a six month period at five different venue events. Of the total 451 visitors to the town who participated in the survey, 51% were out of town visitors, 43% were year-around residents, and 6% were seasonal residents.

The town business owner survey was designed to determine their store hours of operation, town activities/events that have benefitted businesses, marketing methods that have benefitted businesses, business customer estimates, challenges facing business owners, business plans for the future, changes they would like to see in Dillsboro businesses and how the university might be of service to them. The university faculty/staff/student and town visitor surveys were designed to determine their perspective of the town, its offerings, frequency of visits, what they did while in the town, patronizing of the various businesses, advertising sources used, dollars

spent in the town, their opinion of the town, what they like or did not like about the town, suggestions for what would make the town more attractive to them and encourage them to visit the town more frequently.

Survey results were provided to the partnership town officials at meetings as the data from each survey was obtained. Power-point presentations of the survey results were also given at town hall meetings.

4.1 Survey Results

Most (75%) of the business owners indicated having at least one other person working in their business and 83% had a business plan. Of the latter, 39% planned to continue current business operations, while 39% planned to expand their current operations. More than half of businesses surveyed (53%) had an online business in addition to their store front. Of the 47% who didn't have an online business, 80% were not interested in building one. Table 1 summarizes the results of the business owner survey, looking at business attributes, success of promotion methods, hours of operations, successful events, additional events and activities they would like their town to offer, top challenges facing their business, changes in their town they would like to see, and how the university could be of service to them. Respondents felt that the most successful events included the Art and Music Festival (summer), the Juried Pottery Festival and University Mountain Heritage Festival (fall), and the Festival of Lights and Luminaries (winter). Having said this, one of the concerns raised by business respondents was the lack of major tourism or business draw to the town.

In the university survey, the average age of faculty/staff respondents was 47. The average student age was 25. Most respondents were female (64%) and 70% of respondents were faculty or staff. Most (84%) faculty and staff held a four year degree compared to 17% of students who were pursuing advanced degrees. Seventy percent of faculty and staff respondents were employed for more than five years while as expected most students (87%) attended the institution for less than five years. Table 2 summarizes the results of the university faculty/staff and student survey, looking at the demographics of the participants in the survey, their familiarity with the town and its offerings, promotional method they used to find about the town, dollars they spent in the town, reasons they have visited the town, what would make them want to visit more frequently, rating of the town attributes, and their degree of satisfaction with their last visit. Average spending by faculty and staff was \$271 per visit compared to \$170 per student. In addition to special events, restaurants, galleries, gift shops, and specialty items were the primary draws to the community.

Just over one-quarter (26%) of respondents in the Dillsboro Visitor Survey traveled with children and the average adult group size was 3.6 people. Of those that stayed overnight in the area, 33% stayed in Dillsboro. The average stay was 1.8 nights. Dillsboro was the main trip destination for 65% of the visitors. Table 3 summarizes the results of the town visitor survey, characteristics of their visit to the area, frequency of visits to the town, promotion method they used to learn about the towns offerings, their top reasons for being in the town, dollars they spent in the town, rating of town attributes, businesses and activities they would have liked to have seen in the town, and their satisfaction with their last visit. The primary reasons to visit Dillsboro were special events, shopping, dining, recreation, and vacation. AT the same time, respondents wished to see more of these attributes. The average

expected spending was \$135 per person. Overall, respondents were very satisfied with their experience with almost all respondents (99%) planning to return.

Table 1. *Business Owner Survey Results*

Most effective promotion methods	Word of mouth; internet website; newspaper advertising; Chamber of Commerce; Dillsboro Merchants Association
Least effective promotion methods	Direct mail, brochures, regional marketing, cooperative advertising – yet, when asked if they would be interested in participating in cooperative advertising 87% stated they would
Daily hours of operation	The average was 8.5 hours, 87% would extend hours for special events
	78% post their store hours, 59% gave reasons why they may deviate from their posted hours
	43% illuminate their store for window shopping after hours
Most successful events	Summer - Art and Music Festival
	Fall - Juried Pottery Festival, Fall - University Mountain Heritage Day Festival
	Winter - Festival of Lights and Luminaries
Events/Activities they would like the town to offer	Music concerts
	Live entertainment
	Additional festivals
	Special events
	River focused activities
Top challenges facing their business	Tie-ins with university events
	Lack of a major tourism or business draw in the town, lack of customers and sales, their location, economic downtown, competition, advertising and marketing
	Consistent business hours and extended hours of stores
	More attractions to keep visitors in the area
	Get the GSMR train back
Town changes they would like to see	Get empty shops occupied
	More variety of shops and better quality shops
	Develop a year-round marketing strategy
	Support and cooperation among the town's businesses
	Expand town tourism focus to more than just retail shops
	Focus on endeavors that would attract more of the local community
	Offer university discounts with presentation of ID card - 86% (28) of the 33 business owners were willing to offer a discount to increase business
	More customers
	More exposure at the university
	Assistance with promotion of the region
How could the university be of service to them	Assistance with advertising and marketing, business plans, grant funding, student help

Source: Dillsboro Business Owner Survey

Table 2. University Faculty/Staff and Student Survey

How often they visit the town	Few times a year or less than once a year - faculty/staff 52%; students 43%
Recent visit to the town, group composition	Average number of adults in their group - faculty/staff 2 adults, students 3 adults; Average number of children or youth in their group - faculty/staff 1 child/youth, students 1 child/youth
Do not visit the town	Faculty/staff - nothing there interests me, have no reason to visit, I don't live in the area Students - never heard of Dillsboro, don't know where it is, have no reason to visit, I don't live in the area, no access to transportation, nothing fun to do there
Familiarity with town businesses	Faculty/staff 21% 'very' familiar; Students 13 % very familiar
Advertising medium used	Word of mouth - faculty/staff 75%; students 74%, followed by newspaper, a regional tourism magazine, Students also used brochures and the town's website
Purchases in the town	Dining and shopping most frequent purchases by both faculty/staff and students
	Although those who purchased, professional services and health, and personal care spent significantly more money
Dollars spent in town in last year	Overall average dollar amount spent in last year - faculty/staff \$271; Students \$170
Top reasons mentioned for visiting the town	Restaurants, followed by arts and crafts galleries, gift shops, specialty food items, special events and festivals by faculty/staff and students for visiting the town
	Most attended event was Festival of Lights and Luminaries, Arts & Music Festival and water sports by faculty/staff and students
	The number one reason giving why they would like to visit Dillsboro, was for recreational activities, followed by special events and festivals by faculty/staff and students
Town attributes rated	Those rated highest were: local artisans, friendliness, safety, cleanliness/maintenance, historic character by faculty/staff and students
	Those rated lowest were: hours of operation, marketing information, parking, price of products, variety of products, product offerings, recreational activities by faculty/staff and students
Why would they visit more frequently	More variety and quality of businesses, discounts with university ID card, extended business hours of operation, more entertainment, more recreational activities
Satisfaction and Un-satisfaction with last visit	On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest), faculty/staff 3.5 rating; students 3.9 rating
	Plan to return based on their last visit, faculty/staff 95%; students 97%
	not enough variety of things to do and see in the town. faculty/staff - nothing there interests me and students there is nothing there for me.

Source: WCU Faculty/Staff/Student Survey

Table 3. *Town Visitor Survey*

Frequency of town visits	16% were 1st time visitors, 22% came sever times a month, 30% came several times a year, 33% came every year or every few years.
Advertising medium used	Word of mouth (49%), followed by the internet (34%), newspaper (22%)
Top reasons for being in Dillsboro	In ranked order - special events, shopping, dining, recreation, vacation Most mentioned businesses they planned to visit - restaurants, gif shops, arts and crafts galleries/studies, specialty food stores Most mentioned special events attended - Festival of Lights and Luminaries, Pottery Festival
Dollars spent in town during visit	Total average dollars spent/expected to spend in Dillsboro as a result of their visit \$135.
Town attributes rated	Those rated highest were: friendliness, cleanliness/maintenance, town appearance, safety, historic character, building appearance, street appearance Those rated lowest were: marketing information, price of products, recreational activities, parking, hours of operation, variety of products, and product offerings
Businesses and activities they would have liked to have seen	GSMR train, more restaurant options, more events and entertainment options, more recreation, street fairs and festivals, more variety, diversity, specialty and quality places to shop.
Satisfaction level with last visit	Satisfaction rating of their visit, on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest), 4.47 rating Based on their last visit 99% plan to return

Source: Dillsboro Town Visitor Survey

4.2 Similarities of Responses between the 3 Survey Results

Changes Respondents Would Like To See in the Town

Results of all three surveys listed the following changes that would like to be seen in the town: the return of the GSMR train, consistent business hours, extended hours, better marketing, more attractions, more entertainment, more variety and better quality of shops, and better town signage. Table 4 looks at the similarities of responses between the survey results, such as changes that would like to be seen in the town, rating of town attributes, special events most successful, marketing methods most effective, suggestion for the town/university relationship. There were nine areas of agreement in changes respondents in all three surveys would like to see in Dillsboro: return of the GSMR train, consistent business hours, extended business hours, better marketing, more attractions, more entertainment, greater variety of shops, better quality of shops, and better town signage. There was also general agreement about the most successful events (e.g. Pottery Festival, Festival of Lights and Luminaries, Art and Music Festival) and marketing methods (e.g. word of mouth, Internet, newspaper).

Table 4. Areas of Agreement in Responses Between the 3 Survey Results

Attribute	Business Survey	Faculty/Staff/Student Survey	Town Visitor Survey
Town attributes rated high		friendliness	friendliness
		safety	safety
		cleanliness/maintenance	cleanliness/maintenance
		local artisans	town's appearance
		customer service	
Town attributes rated low		hours of operation	hours of operation
		marketing information	marketing information
		parking	parking
		price of products	price of products
		variety of products	variety of products
		product offerings	product offerings
		recreational activities	recreational activities
Special events most successful	Pottery Festival	Pottery Festival	Pottery Festival
	Festival of Lights & Luminaire	Festival of Lights & Luminaire	Festival of Lights & Luminaire
	Art & Musical Festival	Art & Musical Festival	
Marketing methods most effective	Word of Mouth	Word of Mouth	Word of Mouth
	Newspaper	Newspaper	Newspaper
	Internet	Regional Tourism Magazine	Internet
		Brochure (students)	
		Town's Website (students)	
Suggestions for Town/University relationships	Better communication about events & activities at Dillsboro and the University	Better communication about events & activities at Dillsboro and the University	
	about event & activities	about events & activities	
	Provide bus or shuttle service b/t campus & Dillsboro	Provide bus or shuttle service b/t campus & Dillsboro	
	University discount with ID Card	University discount with ID Card	

Source: Dillsboro Business Owner, WCU Faculty/Staff/Student, and Town Visitor Survey

Ratings of Town Attributes

There were also similarities of responses among faculty/staff, students, and visitors/customers in their ratings of town attributes. The attributes rated highest among all groups were friendliness, safety, and cleanliness/maintenance. Faculty/staff and students also rated local artisans high as well as customer service; visitors/customers also rated town appearance high. The attributes rated lowest among all groups were hours of operation, marketing information, parking, price of products, variety of products, product offerings and recreational activities.

Special Events

The two events that were listed as most successful for the business owners were also the two events listed as most attended by the university faculty/staff, students and the town visitors. These were the juried Pottery Festival in November, where more than 40 master potters demonstrate a variety of pottery techniques, and the Festival of Lights and Luminaire in early December. For university respondents this may be because a number of the other special events the town offers are held in summer, when most students and faculty are not in the area.

Marketing Methods

The most effective marketing methods mentioned by all groups surveyed was word-of-mouth and newspaper advertising. Business owners and town visitors also listed the internet as important, whereas university faculty/staff and students listed the regional tourism magazine as important. Interestingly, of all the groups surveyed, only the students listed brochures as an important source.

Recreational Activities, Entertainment, Attractions, Businesses Suggestions

When asked what type of entertainment, special events, activities, attractions would like to be seen the town offer, there were over 1,000 suggestions between the three survey results. Faculty/staff, students, and visitors/customers also listed additional types of businesses they would like to see in the town. Table 5 summarizes the 1,000 suggestions that were made between the three surveys for improving the town's recreational offerings and entertainment offerings. As stated earlier, respondents to all three surveys indicated such offerings as bringing back the train and more activities. There was also general agreement on having more outdoor activities including water-based activities.

Table 6 lists the types of businesses and suggestions to improve operations. As listed, there were a large number of suggestions and a variation in suggestion among respondent type.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusions

This study grew out of the recognition that a university has a role to perform in the economic, social, and cultural well-being of its surrounding geographic regional area and in this case the health of a neighboring small historic rural tourist town, that was struggling economically to cope with loss of customers, job losses, business closures, and less revenue to keep up their town. Future prosperity was going to require strategies to build on the town's assets and undertake initiatives to set the stage for revitalization and growth.

Table 5. *Suggestions from respondents*

Recreational Activities	
Students	bring the train back, outdoor activities, such as disc golf course, skating rink, go carts, river park and picnic area, bowling alley, green park, picnic area
Faculty/Staff	river park, river greenway area, hiking/biking trails, water sports, street fairs, wine or beer festival, music festival, nice outdoor facilities, picnic areas, camping areas, more kid friendly activities
Visitors	bring back the train, the town needs more recreation, suggestions included, horse drawn carriage rides, zip line, rafting, hiking, tubing, more things for kids, fitness area, more recreation with the river
Business Owners	River focused activities, picnic tables, get the train back
Entertainment	
Students	movie theater, drive- in theater, live music, lawn concerts, music festivals, art festivals, artisan festivals, beer festival, night club, dance club
Faculty/Staff	movie theater, outdoor theater, plays, street activities, outside events, vintage care events, singers, bands, musicians, comedians, dancers, storytellers, poets, art shows, art demonstrations and classes, dinner theater, mystery theater, children's theater
Visitors	art and craft festivals, music festivals
Business Owners	more variety of festivals, live music concerts, BBQ or chili cook-off contest, food show

Source: Dillsboro Business Owner, WCU Faculty/Staff/Student, and Town Visitor Survey

This paper examines the benefits of partnership collaboration between a university and a small rural historic tourism town, which sought assistance from the university for the purpose of revitalization after the 2008 economic recession and the loss of a major tourism attraction. The results of the partnership initiatives provided feedback to the town for evaluating current operations and making revitalization improvements for the future.

5.1 Updates in the Town Operations

The most consistently mentioned change respondents of all three surveys wanted to see in Dillsboro was to bring the GSMR train back. Since the loss of the GSMR was seen as major contributor to the downturn in the town's economy, the loss of business revenue, the loss of jobs and the loss of tourists. The town authorities approached the GSMR to discuss what it would take for them to provide excursions back to Dillsboro. The main requirements were to financially assist with the restoration of a steam engine, putting in a turn-around table for the train and putting in a surrounding viewing walkway where

Table 6. *Suggestions from respondents about types and quality of businesses.*

Business Suggestions – Type of Business	
Students	bigger name stores, more apparel stores, music store, fly shop, outdoor gear store, more local products, more variety of restaurants (ethnic), coffee shops, , sports bar, offer some night life
Faculty/Staff	Café that serves wine and beer, night clubs, chain restaurants, ethnic restaurants, sport bar, apartments/condos, greater variety of stores, clothing stores, book store, office supply shop, fabric shop, fishing supply store, organic health food store, outdoor store
Visitors	more upscale restaurants, restaurant bar, bistro, ethnic restaurants, fast food restaurants fishing shop, woodworking shop, antique shop, garden shop, book store
Business Owners	focus on other tourism areas beyond retail, need a bar, our future is not tourism it is wholesale, more diverse shops, more variety of shops, new restaurants, more quality shops, more specialty shops, galleries, shops that bring in locals, more shops that offer local flavor not just touristy gifts, shops for local customer
Business Suggestions - to improve operations	
Students	have a college day, give front of shops a facelift, extend hours of operation, accept cat card, advertise on campus, more parking, town needs something to define itself other than tourism, need another ‘main attraction’ since train is gone , town needs nightlife
Faculty/Staff	advertise on campus, sell university themed items, reduce prices, offer discount coupons, increase hours of operation, stop looking at Dillsboro as a tourist area only we are a community first, Dillsboro needs a main attraction, needs an anchor store, town needs fixed up, make town more attractive, better signage, need activities and businesses to draw the younger people, more parking
Visitors	more variety, diversity, specialty, quality of shops; better parking, marketing, prices; more recreational activities, more events and entertainment options, more restaurant options
Business Owners	offer a discount to WCU, online business in addition to storefront, increase business hours past 5:00, better signage for the town, develop a year round marketing strategy, more tourist attractions to keep visitors in the area, get empty shops occupied; freshen up, clean up and update the store fronts, a more support and cooperative between business owners, better walking path, more communication between the town and the university

Source: Dillsboro Business Owner, WCU Faculty/Staff/Student, and Town Visitor Survey

spectators can watch the engine being rotated. GSMR projected the cost of these endeavors at \$600,000. According to the GSMR 180,000 people currently ride the train yearly on their various routes throughout the Western NC region, and they project a 20% increase in that number of people if Dillsboro was added to the list of routes. GSMR will also hire 15 people to run its operations out of Dillsboro, plus bringing back the train is projected to also increase jobs in the shops, restaurants, lodging accommodations, and other businesses. GSMR also projects the turntable itself will be a big draw for visitors. Dillsboro town officials asked the county officials for assistance with the \$600,000 and negotiations are currently underway with GSMR to bring the train back to Dillsboro.

Business hours of operation were seen as a negative issue of the town by respondents of all three surveys, both in terms of business owners keeping their posted hours of operation and the need to extend their hours of operation, since most businesses close at 5:00 p.m., except for a few restaurants and lodging facilities. The partnership town members also mentioned there were complaints from both tourists and town's people about not being open in the evenings, for those who want to shop after dining or after working, plus the inconsistency of hours of operation by some of the store owners. Findings from the university study revealed that extended store hours of operation would be an asset to this small tourism town in capturing more of the university market and increasing sales, by making it easier to shop after school and work hours. One of the issues some of the business owners mentioned regarding increasing their store hours of operation was that additional labor costs would be prohibitive. So the university partnership members suggested to the partnership town members that the town may want to consider requesting business owners to commit to a trial run initiative of extended store hours such as the program in the historic tourism Virginia town (Staunton Downtown Development Association, 2009). Keeping hours of operation was more of an issue during the off-season months, which is when most of the university community is in the area. In the tourism season months, the town merchants keep their doors open on a more regular basis and update their merchandise offerings.

There have been a number of initiatives to enhance the town's offerings. Although there are still 22 store fronts that sit empty in the town, Dillsboro did turn an environmental pollutant into an economic asset by converting landfill methane gas into energy to power local artists' studios and greenhouses. This has resulted in new businesses and jobs for the community at what is called the Green Energy Park. The town also purchased through a grant a large historic farmhouse and property near the town that it plans to restore into a cultural heritage tourism site, the Appalachian Women's Museum. For the surrounding 16 acres the town has created a new community park with an amphitheater, recreation area, public restrooms, walking trails, and public parking. Future plans include the possibility of adding a performing arts center and historical area showcasing the history of the town of Dillsboro, the county and the development of the western region of North Carolina. The community park is within easy walking distance of the center of town, providing much needed parking for visitors to the town and during special events shuttle buses will be available to transport visitors to the center of town. Also, to enhance the town's outdoor offerings, the town worked with officials to remove a dam in the river on the back area of the town, enhancing the benefits to wildlife-based recreation, providing boaters and anglers more opportunity to enjoy the free-flowing river and reinstate fly fishing as a tourism draw to the area.

New special events the town has developed include the 'Full Spectrum Farms Growers Fair', a unique fair celebrating farmers and growers with an open-air plant and produce market; the 'Rafters & Crafters Festival', which celebrates traditional mountain crafts, regional musicians, dancers and storytellers at historic; the 'ColorFest & Taste of Appalachia', featuring local artists, authors, growers, wine makers and musicians throughout the town; the 'Youth Arts Festival', a family event where youth can participate in hands-on art activities, while professional artists and musicians perform; and the county moved the annual 'Fourth of July Celebration' from another town in the county to Dillsboro. The timing of the events is also important to get the most participation from the university, and the majority of the new events are during the regular school year, fall, winter, and spring, whereas the tourist visitors typically come during the summer and fall.

There have also been a number of marketing updates for the town as a result of the partnership. The university assisted with updating the town's website and assisted in developing websites with a number of business owners which display their products, which can be accessed from the town's website. The university also assisted the town in launching the web app to make it easy for tourists to get in touch with the businesses and see what they have to offer. To insure the university community is aware of Dillsboro special events, there have been articles in the university online news, and email notices and print advertisements have been distributed to faculty/staff and students. The town website now also lists the website of surrounding counties to provide visitors with more local events and to encourage extended stays in the region.

Additional town initiatives in the town's government include a new vision statement for the town, affiliations with regional and state organizations that provide governmental assistance to improve the quality of life in towns, and the formation for various town committees to make town improvements for the future. The town's new vision statement is:

The Town of Dillsboro has and will continue to explore economic and community development while respecting heritage preservation. The Town shall always focus on protecting natural resources and other assets of the community, which make a visit a quality experience. While recognizing the importance of tourism, it will seek opportunities to broaden the business development and encourage expansion of its boundaries as urbanization occurs adjacent to its municipal limits. Dillsboro has and always must strive to make the community a good place to live, work and invest, as well as an interesting place to visit. (www.dillsboronc.info).

As cited by Balden (2009, p.1), the components that make for the greatness of a small town are a "cadre of dedicated citizens with creative ideas and the energy to implement them; a progressive government willing to meet them halfway; opportunities to get close to nature; arts and cultural programs to feed the soul; a desire to meet the challenge of transitioning to renewable energy." In regards to Dillsboro, the cadre of dedicated citizens included dedicated town people (business members of the Dillsboro Merchants Association representing the different types of businesses in the town, and the town mayor) that were concerned about their town decline and recognized their need for professional help. They approached the university chancellor for help to revitalize their town. As a result, a number of

dedicated university professors who had expertise in the areas needed to revitalize the town, came forward to offer their assistance. This resulted in the formation of a university-community partnership committee that met regularly for the next three years. This entire project was the outgrowth of the collaborative efforts of a university-community partnership to revitalize a small historic rural town economically and help its small business owners survive. As has been shown based on the data provided via the surveys, the town has already undertaken a number of efforts to revitalize the town. The university partnership members continue to look forward to additional unique town improvements and business possibilities that will continue to develop out of the results of this partnership. Follow-up studies would be beneficial to track potential changes in visitors and provide future direction.

Factors for success for university –community partnerships include committed leadership from the top with both partners, the development of a mission statement for the partnership, the establishment of goals and objectives as well as ways to measure their progress, and to determine who from the community and the university need to be on the partnership to provide the resources and expertise needed to accomplish the mission, goals and objectives. Furthermore, university participants need to involve community participants in their research projects from the beginning to insure what is being researched will provide valuable outcomes for the community. A good working relationship needs to be established on both sides based on mutual support, trust, and respect, so information can be shared openly. There needs to be ongoing communication between both partners. There needs to be feedback among all stakeholders in the partnership, with the goal of continuously improving the partnership and its outcomes. In addition to holding regular partnership member meetings about the progress being made to keep everyone up to date, it is also good to have some open meetings for others in the community to be able to attend and learn what is being done to improve their community.

As a result of this research, a number of suggestions were pointed out that would benefit Dillsboro. They included extending store hours of operations, better marketing, better signage, more attractions, more entertainment, more recreational activities, more variety of shops, better quality shops, improving parking, be a more family-friendly destination, and getting the GSMR train back. Dillsboro needs more exposure on the university campus, better communication with the university about events and activities, community transportation to provide a bus/shuttle service between campus and Dillsboro, offer discounts to university members with a university I.D. card to increase business. The town would benefit by tracking its progress in these endeavors on an ongoing basis, as well as tracking the number of new businesses in the town, the number of previously vacant store fronts now occupied, new jobs created in the town, and the increase in property tax rates.

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