“ Developing Community in Appalachia through Participatory Action Research and Shared Learning Experiences ”

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ATP Project Outline

Description of Project:

LBAR 3910: Practicum in Liberal Arts, taught by Dr. Mark Wilson, was offered for the first time during the 2010 spring semester. The working title of the course was Developing Community in Appalachia and readings included “Appalachia: A Report by the President’s Appalachia Regional Commission (1964)” and selections from notable scholarly works that relate to the Clearfork Valley: *Power and Powerless: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, *The Kidwells: A Family Odyssey*, “Women and Revolutionary Relations: Community-Building in Appalachia,” etc.

Activities:

During spring break, students traveled to Eagan to work alongside executive director Marie Cirillo, Americorps professionals, and local citizens, including college-age adults who seek to prepare themselves for life through participation in Clearfork Community Institute projects and activities. The projects—all identified, conceptualized, and led by local people—included GIS mapping of natural and cultural resources on the Woodland Community Land Trust, home restoration, oral history interviews, author-led discussions of books related to the community, landscaping the facility, and production of an issue of the institute’s newsletter.

The Clearfork Community Institute is a living-learning educational resource for the community, and the project assisted the organization with the fulfillment of its mission to the community and region. The project allowed college students to live and work alongside local citizens on long-term projects identified by the community, resulting in a lesson on democracy and self-rule that can rarely be learned inside a classroom or through service hour assignments. Two unanticipated but welcomed outcomes emerged: four Auburn students planned and funded their own trip back to the community at the end of the semester to continue work projects with local citizens; two Auburn students participated in five-week summer internships at CCI, upon receiving an invitation from the community to continue work.

Project Outcomes:
• Eleven students earned three hours credit each for their participation in the course.

• Four Auburn University students led and funded their own return trip to the community.

• Two Auburn University students participated in five-week internships in the community. The same two students accompanied the next year’s co-hort

• Poster and conference presentation at the ATP December conference.

• Invitation to participate in a regional project with colleges related to Just Connections, an organization of community organizations and colleges in the region.

• Presentation of project to Auburn University faculty participants of the 3rd Annual Community and Civic Engagement Summer Academy for Faculty.

• Presentation at the 34th Annual Appalachian Studies Association conference in Richmond, Kentucky, March 2011.

Problems Encountered:

We encountered no problems during the semester of work, but students did not perform as well as they had hoped on the presentation at the December ATP conference. We chose to collaborate with our community partners on the presentation, but the geographical distance posed a problem for effective collaboration, and I did not manage the students very well as they prepared the presentation. The presentation at the Appalachian Studies Conference went very well, and the students and community partners were pleased with that activity.

Program Continuation and Sustainability:

Our project has moved forward, and the collaboration between our university and residents in the Clearfork Valley continue to deepen. Eight students enrolled in the course during the Spring 2011 semester, and two students from this project accompanied the new students and assisted local people with coordination of projects. We intend to offer the course again in 2012, and our goal is to increase faculty collaboration with this community.
Conclusions and Recommendations:

We are honored to be a part of the Appalachian Teaching Project, and we look forward to future work together. ATP has allowed me to learn about other models of civic engagement, and the opportunity to learn from the variety of institutions involved has tremendous value. For one of our three students, the December conference was her first visit to Washington, D.C., and I think that experience has tremendous value.

Attachments: I have attached a final reflection on the experience by student Rachel Naftel. As a result of her experience, Rachel led a group of students back to the community following the end of the semester, and she subsequently returned to the community for five weeks to work with the Woodland Community Land Trust and the Clearfork Community Institute.