

**Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI)  
Building Social and Economic Capital in Southwest Virginia  
with Oral History Collecting and Esri ArcGIS Story Mapping**

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**PROJECT FOCUS:** Radford University will continue its collaboration from 2017-18 with the Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI), a multi-member grassroots organization comprised of several Southwest Virginia counties, to collect oral histories from individuals who have grown up in the Clinch River Valley and gather multimedia artifacts for an ArcGIS story map.

**PROJECT DETAILS:**

**Course Number, Name, and Instructor:** Radford University's 2018-19 Appalachian Teaching Project class will be APST495: Research in Appalachia and will be taught in the fall of 2018 by Ms. Stacy Lewis Penven.

**Community Partner(s):** Clinch River Valley Initiative, Friends of Southwest Virginia, Dante Community Association, Opportunity SWVA, and Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation.

**Need:** The Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI), a grassroots effort that formed as a result of the 2010 forum, "Building Local Economies in Southwest Virginia," is dedicated to diversifying the economies in and improving overall quality of life of Southwest Virginia communities that are distressed or at-risk, as classified by ARC data. While much of Central Appalachia transitions to a post-coal economy, various local, state, regional, and national partners are uniting to promote and benefit from the social, cultural, and natural assets of the region. For over two years, Dr. Theresa Burriss has worked with CRVI and Opportunity SWVA in various capacities to help with economic transition efforts in the region. Although CRVI has multiple initiatives, the overarching need seems to be related to capitalizing on natural and cultural assets, as well as marketing those assets. Radford University's involvement addresses the need to capture stories related to the natural and cultural assets of the Clinch River Valley.

Based on feedback from CRVI members of the Environmental Education Action Group and the Downtown Revitalization, Marketing, and Entrepreneurship Action Group, who shared their desire to obtain local stories to augment their downtown revitalization and regional tourism efforts, Radford University students will continue last year's ATP project to collect oral histories. This semester, rather than beginning a new collaboration with a different town in the Clinch River Valley, students will extend last year's work in Dante, VA. As one of three new Hometowns on the Clinch, Dante is poised to benefit from oral history collecting and story mapping as town leaders work to bolster community pride and increase tourism. Engaging with the same town allows students to further support the Dante Community Association's goal of leveraging the town's unique history in its revitalization efforts as well as cultivate the established relationship between Dante and Radford University.

Students will collect oral narratives from Dante locals about their education and work history, what their lives were like growing up in the Clinch River Valley, and how their lives have changed over time. Students will ask interviewees about their experiences living in a once booming coal town. The interviewees will also discuss their personal recollections as the coal industry eventually left the area and explore how the community is rebuilding itself in a post-coal economy.

The transcribed oral histories will result in a book to be sold at Clinch River venues and online to both locals and tourists. Ms. Penven and her students will also begin helping CRVI with the editing process of the 18 oral histories collected last semester. Select audio clips from the interviews will be used in kiosks along the Clinch River. Representatives from the Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation explained that they are equipped to implement kiosks because they exist in other state parks. Additionally, these audio clips can be used on Clinch community and business websites and in paddling itineraries.

In addition to the oral history collection, Ms. Penven and her students will be collaborating with Radford University's Geospatial Science Department to create a story map of Dante. Utilizing the ArcGIS platform, students will produce an interactive map which will "combine authoritative maps with narrative text, images, and multimedia content" to present the stories of the people and the places in Dante (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com>). Students will record information about the geography and environment of

Dante by taking guided hikes and visiting historical points of interest. Multimedia artifacts such as photographs, videos, and recorded narratives will be curated for use in the story map. Dante's story map can be shared on the CRVI website, the Dante Community Association website, and Virginia tourism website. The oral history and story map work aligns with the ARC's strategic investment Goal 1: Economic Opportunities, Goal 4: Natural and Cultural Assets, and Goal 5: Leadership and Community Capacity, as well as the ARC's commitment to "achieve the greatest impact possible, leveraging ARC's limited resources to bring more resources into the Region" (*Investing in Appalachia's Future*, 42).

**Overview of the project, including its central focus:**

During the ATP Retreat held at ETSU in May of 2016, participating ARC officials stressed the need for ATP projects to align with the ARC's strategic plan and, in particular, to increase partnerships and leverage limited resources. Based on this information, Dr. Burriss sought community partners engaged in a region-wide initiative and one that ideally had been supported by the ARC. These tenets are still germane to Radford University's continuing work with CRVI.

The Clinch River Valley Initiative includes Tazewell (transitional), Russell (at-risk), Scott (at-risk), and Wise (distressed) Counties, as well as a host of local, regional, state, and national partners; moreover, the ARC has supported the group.

CRVI has five main goals:

Goal 1: Create a Clinch River State Park.

Goal 2: Develop and integrate access points, trails, and campgrounds along the Clinch River.

Goal 3: Improve water quality in the Clinch River.

Goal 4: Increase environmental education opportunities for all community members in the Clinch River watershed.

Goal 5: Foster Downtown Revitalization, Marketing and Entrepreneurial Development Opportunities in the Clinch River Valley.

Each goal has an action group associated with it so members solely concentrate on achieving their respective goal. After reading about the goals, listening to group members share their work, and talking with several group members, Dr. Burriss determined that Radford University students could best serve CRVI's goals 4 and 5 by collecting stories from residents who have lived in the Clinch River Valley most if not all their lives. In the *Clinch River Valley Initiative Action Plan*, ([www.clinchriverva.com](http://www.clinchriverva.com) Oct. 2017), the Environmental Education and Downtown Revitalization action groups list "Potential Actions & Next Steps," which include the following relevant to RU's collaboration:

- Develop a multi-day float down the Clinch with stops planned to interview community members along the way [...] (21)
- Develop a directory for outdoor adventure, including items like a sample itinerary for a trip to the region for vacation planning purposes (21)
- Implement Hometowns of the Clinch program in communities throughout the Clinch Valley to help establish a broad vision and identity in the Clinch River Valley, strengthen and promote community character and sense of place (25)
- Continue to distribute Clinch brochures and merchandise throughout the Clinch Valley, especially to help towns earn the designation of a Hometown, one requirement of which is to have a community site with these objects available (25)
- Expand tourism infrastructure, especially that of cultural, historical, and adventure tourism [...] (25)
- Develop learning opportunities for residents and visitors to provide information about the value of the river and local resources (25)

This collaboration between CRVI and RU meets the ARC's mission to "Innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia." Radford University students' collection of the river stories will address the bullet points above, as each focuses on building community capacity and strengthening economic growth through "cultural, historical, and adventure tourism."

**Number and description of planned meetings with the community partner:** Ms. Penven and her students will interact with community partners by email and Facebook prior to visiting the area. Given the geographical distance between the City of Radford and Dante, students will travel with Ms. Penven to the Clinch River Valley on at least three Saturdays for meetings with community partners to collect stories and artifacts (dates to be determined). We anticipate collecting VR180 immersive photos and videos, narratives about local points of interest, and at least six (6) oral histories. CRVI member Lou Ann Wallace and Dante community partners Cat Pratt and Jason Gullet will identify Dante residents that the RU students will interview and will coordinate hikes and tours of the area. RU students will present at one Dante Community Association meeting and, if possible, at one CRVI meeting (dates to be determined).

**Course Guidelines and Project Goals:**

1. Student Goals:
  - A. Students will develop leadership skills and awareness of community assets that can foster sustainability.
    - i. RU students will continue to develop a broad inventory of community assets, both cultural and natural, specifically in Dante, as they interact with CRVI partners and study several communities in the Clinch Valley. Research will offer students a way to historically contextualize the Valley and trace its current status all within a changing global economy. As students engage with the partners, and then conduct interviews, they will bolster their leadership skills with a heightened awareness of the importance of strong oral and written communication skills. Moreover, they will witness effective grassroots collaboration with the multiple stakeholders that make up CRVI. CRVI incorporates multiple issues within its mission, thus positioning it to succeed; moreover, CRVI's "consensus-based approach" (*Clinch River Valley Initiative Action Plan 2*) demonstrates the group's commitment to respond in ways that represent all members' voices, ideas, and concerns. Such democratic leadership characterizes the best of grassroots organizations, a lesson that students will appreciate should be replicated in other arenas for true civic leadership.
  - B. Students will be engaged as active learners and participants in community projects.
    - i. RU students will not only acquire knowledge of Clinch Valley communities through textual materials, they also will learn about these communities through the stories they collect from individuals, who have resided in the Valley most if not all of their lives. A key text in the course will be *Oral History Theory*, which examines ethical oral history practices in an age of digital technologies. Such preparation will enable the students to more sensitively engage with informants as they elicit their lived experiences in the Valley. Additionally, through the process of gathering materials for the story map, students will gain a holistic understanding of the area. Only through such place-based educational opportunities can students come to better know a place. To better understand the economic and cultural contexts of the region, students will read *Do, Die, or Get Along: A Tale of Two Appalachian Towns*, by Peter Crow.
  - C. Students will engage in active research to assist communities in creative approaches to sustainability through asset development.
    - i. While in the classroom, RU students will study oral history methods and methodologies so they understand both theoretical and practical implications of such story collecting. Students will read and apply *Participatory Development in Appalachia : Cultural Identity, Community, and Sustainability* to appreciate the ways in which communities such as Dante are developing grassroots initiatives in order to make a just

transition to a post-coal economy. The collected narratives and the information on historical and natural locales become the marketable assets Clinch communities will use in their efforts to increase tourism, amplify community pride, and solidify sense of place. All of these address the need for sustainable, healthy Appalachian communities. In the process, however, students will learn that “community” may mean different things to different people based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Throughout Fisher and Smith’s work, *Transforming Places*, they and many contributors caution against exclusionary definitions of Appalachia. Both editors came to realize “the importance of place as a source of personal identity and motivating force in local and regional resistance struggles” (vii). Diana Fuss, in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, also discusses the political power of groups rallying around a common term of identification. Students will learn about outmigration patterns over the twentieth century that affected Southwest Virginia and leaves these counties primarily white (Russell County 97.8% out of 27,891; Scott County 97.9% out of 22,126, Tazewell County 94.6% out of 42,899, and Wise County 93% out of 39,718 according to the latest US Census Bureau statistics; see <http://www.census.gov/>).

2. Student Activities:
  - A. Active engagement with at least one community partner-organization or group throughout the semester (some institutions may choose to work with multiple partners). The project cannot be strictly classroom-based.
    - i. As noted above, students will travel to Dante, VA, multiple times and will conduct email, text, and phone discussions before the physical meetings.
  - B. Presentation of research at the ATP conference in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 30 and Dec. 1, 2018.
  - C. Creation of a poster for presentation at poster sessions at the Washington, D.C. conference and during a panel session at the Appalachian Studies Association Conference in Asheville, March 14-17, 2019.
  - D. Participation in a panel discussion at the Appalachian Studies Association’s Annual Conference in Asheville in March 2019.

### Project Goals

1. Student participatory/active research will focus on Appalachian communities, preferably one or more of the ARC-designated distressed counties. For continuity of research and relationships, some faculty will continue to work with the same community that was the focus of their previous research and study. Additionally, some communities may be selected because they constitute “distressed” populations within counties that are not formally labeled as distressed.
  - As noted above, Dr. Burriss specifically selected CRVI because the group’s multifaceted work is being conducted in counties that are primarily at-risk or distressed, with one county, Tazewell, designated as transitional.
  - Given the five goals of CRVI, and its ongoing work, Dr. Burriss anticipates maintaining this partnership for multiple years. CRVI’s goals are ambitious, which necessitates a long-term commitment. This year’s ATP efforts will include collecting oral histories, as well as the editing process for an eventual book publication, but is widening its focus from past years to include creating a digital story map for Dante, VA, as yet another way to catalog and promote the region’s cultural and natural assets.
2. Opportunities for students, most of whom are Appalachian natives and/or residents, to experience various parts of the region and the work of the Commission in Washington, D.C.

- Radford University's involvement with CRVI takes RU students outside of the New River Valley to experience the diversity of the region, as well as various opportunities and challenges. They come to understand the different political economies within Appalachia Virginia and how the ARC is responding to and investing in different communities based on community need, participation, and initiative. The ARC's support of CRVI demonstrates how this works.
3. Opportunities for students to share their research activities in the broader professional community of Appalachian Studies scholars and activists in the Appalachian Studies Association.
- RU students will enjoy the experience of presenting their work before other ATP schools and ARC officials at the December 2018 ATP Conference. They will come to appreciate how their work in Southwest Virginia, and particularly the Clinch River Valley, fits into a broader network that focuses on the sustainability and capacity building of all Appalachian communities, no matter their differences or similarities, from New York to Mississippi.

**Project Impact: "What changes do you hope will occur in the community as a result of this project?"**

- Dr. Burriss and Ms. Penven hope that Radford University students' participation in the Clinch River Valley Initiative will result in increased community pride, identity, and sense of place. This certainly was evident with last year's project, as residents were eager to share their life narratives and community partners were excited about our interest in Dante's rich cultural history. Additionally, Dr. Burriss and Ms. Penven hope the oral history book will provide communities with a saleable item to help with marketing the Clinch River Valley to regional, national, and international tourists, and they hope the narrative audio clips, which will be available in kiosks and on websites, also will be useful to attract tourists. A paddling itinerary that includes these stories would make for a more meaningful experience for visitors. We also anticipate that Dante's story map will attract tourist interest in the unique natural and historical offerings of this notable coal town.
- Due to RU students' focus on at-risk and distressed counties in Appalachia Virginia, they will increase their understanding of the impacts of single-industry economies, the need for collective participation to address those impacts, and what it means to be an active citizen who listens deeply and respectfully to community members in such at-risk and distressed counties. Through story collecting and interaction with community partners, students will gain knowledge from Clinch River Valley residents to aid the students in their cultural humility and sensitivity, attributes that will serve them well no matter where they live and work.
- As RU students gather stories and multimedia artifacts, they will be attuned to residents' recommendations to ensure Appalachian communities are sustainable. Additionally, by entering into partnership with CRVI and its allies, students will be able to share their research of the area and suggest other actions CRVI action groups may not have considered.
- CRVI, its allies, and Clinch Valley residents will all know that the RU students are participating in the ARC's Appalachian Teaching Project. The students will explain the ATP mission and its history, which they will learn in the classroom. As a result, community partners and students come to appreciate the ARC's diverse investments in the Region.

Works Cited and Consulted

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