

Linking Natural and Cultural Assets in the Upper New River Valley

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PROJECT FOCUS

Appalachian State University will collaborate with The New River Conservancy to develop a series of projects that address environmental and economic issues in the upper New River valley. Students and community members in Ashe and Watauga counties of North Carolina will develop innovative projects that will serve as a model for communities throughout the 320-mile New River Valley.

PROJECT DETAILS (Course number, name and instructor)

AS 5065, Sustainability and the Arts in Appalachia, Tom Hansell

COMMUNITY PARTNER

New River Conservancy

NEED

The New River is a significant watershed for the Appalachian region. The river directly touches eleven counties in three states, starting in western North Carolina's high country before winding through Virginia, eventually meeting the Gauley River in West Virginia to create the Kanawah River. The Appalachian Regional Commission has classified eight of the eleven counties in the New River valley as "at-risk".

Our community partners at The New River Conservancy (NRC) began operation in 1976 during a fight to stop a proposed dam in Allegheny County, North Carolina. At that time, the organization was known as the "National Committee for the New." Their success kept the dam from being built and led to the New River's designation as a National Scenic River.

During the past four decades, the NRC has monitored water quality, secured conservation easements, and promoted recreational opportunities along the 320 mile river valley. Recently, the organization identified the need to improve their capacity to share information about the river with policy makers and the communities they serve.

Our project will employ strategic partnerships to increase awareness of water quality issues and build the capacity of NRC to support sustainable communities in the New River Valley.

PLANNED MEETINGS WITH THE COMMUNITY PARTNER

- February 3, 2016 – Initial meeting between faculty and New River Conservancy
- May 20, 2016 – Planning meeting with faculty and New River Conservancy
- July 24, 2016 - Planning meeting with faculty and New River Conservancy
- August 18, 2016 – New River Conservancy meets with students on ASU campus.
- September 10, 2015 - Students meet with New River Conservancy at Elk Knob State Park
- September and October 2016 – students work in small groups with New River Conservancy
- November 10, 2015 – Students present their work to New River Conservancy
- December 2 & 3, 2016 – Students present their work at the annual Appalachian Teaching Conference in Washington, D.C.
- March 10-12, 2017 – Students present at the Appalachian Studies Association annual conference in Blacksburg, VA.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

Linking Natural and Cultural Assets in the Upper New River Valley is a partnership between the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University and the New River Conservancy. This project will be linked with other events to recognize the 40th anniversary of this regional non-profit organization.

The vision of The New River Conservancy (NRC) is “that clean water, healthy land, and empowered people benefit our (Appalachian) communities by creating a watershed where people want to live, work, and play.” The NRC works in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. However, this project will focus on the headwaters of the New River in Ashe and Watauga Counties of North Carolina. Our goal is to create strategic projects that build the New River Conservancy’s capacity to improve the entire New River watershed.

During the Fall semester of 2016 Students will research the theories behind asset based development and participatory planning, then engage in projects that challenge them to apply their knowledge in real world settings with community partners. This work will strengthen NRC’s capacity by providing new tools to share their work with a broad public and connecting the NRC to new community, private, and public sector partners. We will build leadership skills in students by connecting their interests and applying their learning to real life situations in communities along the New River.

Students will present their work in several public forums, including a NRC 40th anniversary event, the Appalachian Teaching Project at the annual conference, and the annual conference of the Appalachian Studies Association.

COURSE GUIDELINES AND PROJECT GOALS

Course Description for AS 5065, Sustainability and the Arts in Appalachia:

This course offers graduate students a chance to learn theory and practice in the growing field of sustainability and the arts as it applies to the Appalachian region. Students will examine sustainability as it is understood through the lenses of planning, ecological theory, and cultural policy. These theoretical approaches will be grounded in participatory, symbiotic projects which allow for students to collaborate with community based organizations in the Appalachian region.

Course Objectives:

Upon completion of this course students will:

- Be able to clearly articulate theories from the various fields which study sustainability as applied to arts and music and connect those theories to local organizations and issues
- Understand how government policies can shape cultural practices
- Have collaborated with groups and individuals working on local cultural projects
- Developed leadership skills
- Increased the capacity of the community partner organizations

Goals:

The proposed work directly addresses goals 4 and 5 of the Appalachian Regional Commission's strategic plan, listed below. The project supports additional ARC goals, such as water systems in goal 3 and skill building in goal 2. All of these elements are vital to increasing economic opportunity in the Appalachian region, the primary goal of the ARC.

- **Goal 1: Economic Opportunities**
Invest in entrepreneurial and business development strategies that strengthen Appalachia's economy.
- **Goal 2: Ready Workforce**
Improve the education, knowledge, skills, and health of residents to work and succeed in Appalachia.
- **Goal 3: Critical Infrastructure**
Invest in critical infrastructure—especially broadband; transportation, including the Appalachian Development Highway System; and water/wastewater systems.
- **Goal 4: Natural and Cultural Assets**
Strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by leveraging the Region's natural and cultural heritage assets.
- **Goal 5: Leadership and Community Capacity**
Build the capacity and skills of current and next-generation leaders and organizations to innovate, collaborate, and advance community and economic development.

PROJECT IMPACT

The impact of this project can be measured in both long-term goals and short-term goals.

In the long term, we are building the capacity of the non-profit sector in our community. Specifically, this project will strategically link the work of the New River Conservancy to additional community partners such as the Elk Knob Community Heritage Organization and Elk Knob State Park. The work created by students in Ashe and Watauga Counties will provide a model that the New River Conservancy can use to plan future projects in other communities along the New River. The students will gain experience working with a community organization on a project that will exist outside of the classroom. This community based work will increase employment options for students and make them more likely to remain in the Appalachian region after graduation.

The short-term impact of the project can be measured by a set of deliverables, including:

- Development of a series of presentations interpreting the cultural and economic value of the river at North Carolina State Parks (Elk Knob and New River)
- Web based materials on the history of the New River Conservancy, including local efforts to preserve and perpetuate local agriculture and artisan food products.
- A tour of water quality enhancement projects in the upper New River Valley
- Planning for future projects to increase visibility
- Enhancement of student and community awareness of rural development work, including the role of federal agencies like the ARC
- Presentation of student work at the ATP Conference in Washington, D.C. December 2 and December 3, 2016
- Presentation at Appalachian Studies Association Conference in Blacksburg, VA, March 9 through March 12, 2017
- Creation of a poster and other presentation assets for the conference in Washington, D.C. as well as multiple, community-based meetings

Finally, this work will result in strategic partnerships that build the capacity of our community partners, develop leadership skills in our students and encourage our institution to support future projects designed to create economic opportunity in the Appalachian region.