

The Sustainable Indiana Project: Supporting Grassroots Efforts to Foster Sustainable Communities and Environments in Indiana County

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Final Report Narrative

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Description of Project:

The Sustainable Indiana Project conducting during the Fall Semester 2012-2013 was the beginning of a collaboration between the IUP Anthropology Department, IUP Center for Northern Appalachian Studies, and a local grassroots community organization, the Coalition for a Health County (CHC). One of the main goals of this project was to conduct a participatory envisioning process that involved students and community members in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information about community concerns with cultural and environmental sustainability and sustainable development in Indiana County. This report details the outcomes of the Appalachian Teaching Project conducted at IUP in Fall 2012, including links to our final video and material documenting the progress of our work.

CHC is a membership based, non-partisan community organization based in Indiana county that formed in response to new pressures to negotiate the meaning of community, wellness, and sustainability during a time of great change in northern Appalachia – the re-industrialization of the country-side through deep well hydraulic fracturing for natural gas. CHC has a membership of over 250 people, and has grown as a coalition to partner with state and local environmental groups, drawing on these resources with the objective of supporting local and state legislators in their efforts to responsibly develop this industrial boom while protecting the cultural and environmental assets of the county. As it expanded in membership, CHC was prompted to grow beyond a focus on fracking, as members discussed a host of interconnected concerns with sustainability in a county flanked by 5 coal fired power plants, with a legacy of industrial resource extraction (including many potential brownfields), and in communities that depend on local subsistence resources.

This project joined CHC members with students from Anthropology 420: Cultural Ecology, a class designed to introduce students to the breadth of

Student Feedback on the IUP 2012 Appalachian Teaching Project

“This project wasn’t a paper written only to be thrown away after final grades come in; it had real implications for the community. It is a great teaching tool, and one in which I hope IUP can continue to take part.” - Katie Fox

*“Throughout our Cultural Ecology course we have become invested in the issues facing Indiana County, primarily issues dealing with sustainability. However, although Indiana County may seem isolated, it actually shares a common history with many communities along the Appalachian Mountains. These communities have also faced extensive resource extraction and are still threatened with the loss of their environment as well as their way of life. What the Appalachian Teaching Project accomplished was bringing together these communities to open a discourse about how we can combat these common threats, so that we may learn from the solutions others have developed and implement them within our own communities.”
- Sean Herald*

*“I feel as though IUP students have the capacity to boost pride in the Indiana area through creative means.”
- Kelly Muthler*

work done in the dynamic field of environmental anthropology. Concerned with human-environment interactions as well as engaged community-based research methodologies, environmental anthropology can help grassroots community organizations identify the locally meaningful cultural and ecological assets that form the bases for sustainable regional development.

The Sustainable Indiana Project partnered students with CHC members to conduct a community based needs assessment designed to help to identify CHC priorities, promote partnerships between CHC and other area community and civic groups, and work towards a plan for sustainability that grows out of a diversity of voices and experiences.

Activities:

Planning for this project began with conversations with the CHC steering committee in May 2012. I attended a committee meeting in which I described the Appalachian Teaching Project and we discussed a potential collaboration that might meet the parameters of the program. CHC was an organization at a crucial turning point. Having had significant success building members and promoting the protection of conservation areas in the county, CHC had the opportunity to assess its long term mission during a hiatus in drilling (due to the low cost of natural gas). A contributing factor to the ultimate design of this project was my involvement in the newly minted Indiana Borough Green Task Force- a group convened by the mayor of Indiana Borough to combat loss of population through green initiatives that would enhance quality of life for local residents. CHC members decided that a useful project would involve a survey of members about quality of life, community assets, and attitudes towards sustainability – all of which would help CHC define its goals, and contribute in a useful way to sustainable development in Indiana Borough and the surrounding area.

The next step involved a conference call (see minutes in the appendix) with CHC steering committee members and leaders of partner organizations, including the Sierra Club and Penn Environment. This phone call helped to shape the research design and goals.

At the beginning of Fall Semester, CHC leader Brian Cope attended a class meeting, along with two other community leaders affiliated with CHC – Laurie Lafontaine and John Dudash. Laurie Lafontaine was instrumental in creating the local bike trail system, and had recently completed a decade long project to rewrite the county comprehensive plan in a way that reflected principles of sustainable development. John Dudash is a member of the Pennsylvania Senior Environmental Corps, and has been a leader in water quality monitoring in the area. These three speakers truly catalyzed the students through presentations that spoke not only of the genesis of CHC, but gave rich insight into the history of resource extraction in northern Appalachia, and introduced students to the passion and commitment that long-term residents have toward community, land, and water.

The next stage of the project asked students to conduct qualitative interviews with local residents about sustainability in our area. Interviews were semi-structured. Although specific questions varied by interview, the students shared common goals: assessing people's perspectives on the meaning of sustainability (a slippery concept), their thoughts on challenges to sustainable practice in our area, and opportunities for sustainable development. Students transcribed key parts of these interviews, and wrote analytical essays thinking about the interviews in light of class readings on sustainability.

The qualitative interviews provided the platform for the next stage of the project- a survey of CHC members (see appendix for the final survey and results). The class met in a computer lab on campus. In groups of 5, students created Qualtrics accounts in which they could collaborate on composing survey questions. Based on a debriefing of our qualitative interviews- we compiled a list of key concerns and issues to include in the survey. For instance, we included all of the concerns listed during the interviews, as well as local 'assets' that people described. In the survey, we asked people to rank these, while offering space for them to elaborate on or add to these topics. This survey was designed to assess members' perceptions of environmental risks, and priorities for working towards a sustainable future in our county. The survey also helped to identify specific places of concern to the Indiana County community that may be the target for future brownfields remediation projects conducted by CHC and partner organizations.

Groups 'shared' their Qualtrics survey questions with each other, with myself, and with CHC leaders. The final survey compiled the best questions from each of the 6 class groups. We pilot tested this survey with the CHC steering committee, refining questions based on their recommendations. This survey was distributed via email to all CHC members and to people who had signed petitions created by CHC. The survey was open for two weeks, and then the student groups were responsible for composing an analysis of the data. We shared these analyses with CHC, and then compiled a 2 page handout summarizing the survey results (attached below). This handout was distributed at the final event, 'Sustainable Indiana', planned by students in collaboration with CHC steering committee members.

The final research aspect of the 'envisioning sustainability project' involved interviews with organizations that are members of CHC (CHC, Friends of Yellow Creek, Yellow Creek Conservation Association, Friends of Whites Woods, Sierra Club, Penn Environment, Penn Future, IUP ECO club, Central Indiana County Water Authority), and groups that they work closely with on issues of sustainability (Evergreen Conservancy, the League of Women Voters). These interviews explored their vision for sustainability in Indiana County and the efforts of their organization to achieve this vision. Students video-taped these interviews and, with additional footage and still photos, created 5 minute video segments profiling the local work and perspectives of these distinct organizations. This aspect of the project was somewhat challenging, as the groups of students had to coordinate their schedules with those of busy community leaders. Ultimately, students were unable to contact Penn Environment or Penn Future for interviews. Also, it was challenging getting everyone up to speed on the rudiments of using the video hardware and editing software. We used cameras, tripods, and microphones from the IUP campus library, and had a small training session on how to use this equipment. Syncing footage was something of a challenge given the various cameras we had to work with, and the uneven audio quality of some of the takes. The video editing process was facilitated by the IUP digital media lab. After meeting with me to discuss the project, student workers at this lab created an online tutorial for my students, introducing them to the professional video editing software available at our campus media pods. Student groups edited the final versions of their videotaped interviews using hard-drives purchased for the project via matching funds contributed by the dean of our college.

Although this segment of the project was very challenging, it led to some rich video footage, interesting conversation, and networking opportunities for students. CHC head Gerald Smith met with two of the more tech-savvy students in our class in order to compile the final video. This video was edited into four segments- a profile of CHC, a discussion about sustainability in our area, a discussion about barriers to

sustainability, and people's various perspectives on future opportunities for sustainable development. This video was a critical part of the final outreach event planned by students and CHC leaders. It was screened at the event, and used to kick-start conversation among attendees.

The video has been uploaded to YouTube and can be located at the following links:

Part 1 - What is the Coalition for a Healthy County? 6:45

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUYpFpP3P6Y>

Part 2: CHC Sustainable Indiana: What About Sustainability? 7:48

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQ95IBWgQP0>

Part 3: CHC Sustainable Indiana: What Are Barriers to Sustainability? 7:48

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GehEEQP0MTw>

Part 4: CHC Sustainable Indiana: Where Do We Go From Here? 7:48

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mjN7nWTNKg>

Presentations of the research project:

Students compiled their work into a multimedia presentation to the CHC annual meeting, involving CHC, its coalition partners, and other community members. About 45 people attended the event on December 6, 2012 in the downtown Indiana theater- a historic building that is undergoing a revitalization project. This event was designed to disseminate the results of the project, inform the planning process of CHC, and identify the assets and priorities for the next stage of action in relation to achieving a sustainable future for Indiana County residents. During this event, students not only presented on the project, but facilitated focus groups about potential future projects and priorities (detailed below).

Publicity for this event involved flyers (see attached), social media, and CHC outreach at:

<http://coalitionforahealthycounty.wordpress.com/2012/11/21/chc-and-iup-present-sustainable-indiana-126-downtown-indiana-theater/>

Students presented on this project in four other venues- at the ATP conference in Washington, D.C., at the IUP Undergraduate Scholars Forum, at the IUP Earth Day Celebration, and at a local community wellness fair. At the IUP Undergraduate Scholars Forum, held April 2, 2013, six students from our class presented our poster. These students were awarded the IUP ECO Award for Innovation in Sustainability at an awards ceremony attended by the president of the University. Award winners were announced at the IUP website: <http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=141299>

Based on the presentation of our research at the Undergraduate Scholars Forum, these students were also invited to attend a community wellness fair hosted in downtown Indiana at the Sunflower Yoga Studio on April 27. Information about the Wellness Fair can be found at: http://www.thepenn.org/2010-11-news/2.20155/spring-wellness-fair-takes-on-personal-community-wellness-1.3038778#.UJ_OrtI3tAc

Finally, students presented on their work at the IUP Earth Day Celebration, held at the Oak Grove on April 22, 2012. This was the largest Earth Day Celebration held at IUP in recent history, and was enriched by

the presence of ECO award winning scholars, including students involved in the ATP project. Information about this event can be found here: <http://www.thepenn.org/iup-earth-day-celebrations-spread-sustainable-awareness-1.3033858#.UaYIO9I3tAc>

Project Outcomes:

This project had outcomes related to student-learning and relationship-building. This project provided a valuable opportunity for students to conduct community based research, and contextualize this work in broader issues facing communities in Appalachia.

Students had the opportunity to develop leadership and citizenship skills, along with strengthening writing and oral presentation skills. These pedagogical outcomes were realized through a participatory envisioning process that involved students and community members in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information about community concerns with cultural and environmental sustainability in Indiana County. Based on this work, students created a final report and multimedia presentation for the CHC annual meeting in December 2012, along with the ATP conference in Washington, D.C. in November. The film created by students and CHC leaders is now available for use by CHC to talk about its origins and long-term goals. Students also created a poster to disseminate the results of their research at community and campus venues.

Another exciting outcome of this project involved the potentially lasting partnerships formed between campus and community groups – notably the Coalition for a Healthy County and its coalition members. In a place where there are significant challenges involved with bridging campus and community rifts, this project was an important step in this direction. This outcome was accomplished through collaborative research that identified community assets, environmental concerns, and sustainability goals - providing a solid platform for future collaboration on achieving a locally meaningful vision of sustainability

Problems Encountered:

This section details lessons learned, rather than problems encountered. For the most part, the program was completed according to plan, with no significant problems. However, I did learn a lot that I can take with me when designing future projects.

This was my first time directing a project that partners students with a community organization to conduct original research and outreach. It was incredibly rewarding for all parties, but also very demanding. I learned a lot about creating a syllabus that balances research and outreach as complements to class material. In some ways, I think that the three components to this project were a bit too ambitious. Scheduling filmed interviews with 10 community organizations partnered to the CHC was somewhat challenging, and not enough time was left for the laborious job of editing the footage. In the end, we came up with a film that we were able to screen at the CHC Sustainable Indiana event in December, but it was really hard to complete that within the timeframe of the semester. Similarly, we did not complete our poster until after the conference in Washington. As a first-time conference attendee, I was so involved with coordinating travel and planning our presentation, that I did not prioritize the poster.

I also learned successful group presentation strategies from the ATP conference in D.C. We were able to take those examples and craft a very skilled presentation of our research poster (finally completed!), winning an award at the IUP Undergraduate Scholars Forum, and getting invited to present at another community venue – a local wellness fair.

There was one part of the project that I did not get to complete. Due to scheduling issues and other job commitments, I was unable to coordinate student attendance at the Appalachian Studies Conference this past Spring. However, it is my hope that I would be able to attend this in the future given the opportunity to participate in this program again.

Program Continuation and Sustainability:

I believe that we have made lasting partnerships with a number of community leaders and organizations. These relationships are powerful, and involve faculty, students, and community members of various ages and backgrounds. I truly believe that these diverse relationships are the key to building sustainable communities and reclaiming commons. One of the students who interviewed the League of Women Voters was recently nominated for an award with this organization, and is a rising young leader who is now networked with an important group of role models. Another student is pursuing her passion for local food sheds with potential graduate work in Pittsburgh, and is now linked to local groups doing this kind of work in our region.

Overall, in final reflections of the class, students described the ways in which they began to see themselves as catalysts for positive, creative change. One student remarked: “Since I have lived my entire life in Indiana County, I see more into this culture than perhaps some others studying at IUP. I think we have conducted incredibly valuable research and discussion on developmental issues within Indiana. The next step is action.”

Another student described an evolution in the ways in which they conceived of sustainability during the course of the class, from an individualistic notion to one that was rooted in social action:

One thing I didn't really notice at first was the nature of our project's ideas. At first we all used our own definition of sustainability, then our solutions went from recycling to community projects, to IUP farming (of which I am still an avid supporter). The class's solutions changed from abstract to concrete, but the most interesting ones came out of the meeting. From weekly specials on WIUP, to Green business incentives, to alternative energy - the ideas were flowing.

Some of the most powerful observations about the value of this work, and the potential for future collaborations, came from students from local communities. One student, from Saltsburg, wrote:

I think the focus needs to be more on the community and creating a bridge between the college and the members of the community. The CHC can help be a bridge for that by sponsoring and co-hosting events with the university students. This could create more education on sustainability practices, conserve and improve community assets and keep more people in this area, because Indiana County is a beautiful place, but I sometimes feel that the assets of this area get ignored because of the lack of community pride. I can personally vouch for Saltsburg, by saying that the

youth have no pride in their town. Most of the people get out of there as soon as they can, and on more than one occasion I have heard the excuse, "I'm from Saltsburg," like it is a bad thing. The image in this area needs to be improved, starting with the youth.

Our project was also useful for CHC, who was able to assess priorities and concerns of its members and branch out into other community based projects based on this feedback. This Spring, CHC members joined with other community leaders to spearhead a film series in the downtown theater. This film series, titled 'A New Economy' was focused on the integration of environmental and social justice issues, and showed films that addressed issues such as Marcellus Shale development, creative adaptations to climate change, and community revitalization through urban gardening. This film series has typically involved panel discussions during intermission, some of which have featured students from our class speaking alongside filmmakers, policymakers, artists, and environmental leaders.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

This project has opened many doors for potential future collaborations. During the community event, students facilitated break-out conversations with community members about potential projects that could build on local assets. Those conversations occurred at various levels. On a conceptual level, people discussed a perceived rift between the university and the community, along with the potential to heal this rift with more meaningful student involvement in community affairs, involvement that would help to promote a sense of pride, belonging, and investment in a community with a large transient population. On more practical levels, people suggested future projects that ranged from 'sustainability education workbooks', infrastructure projects to link campus with the downtown, and alternative energy workshops.

Students also brainstormed future projects based on the work that they did this year. Their fantastic ideas involved a number of projects designed to make local foods more accessible to campus and the town, assist the struggling farmers market, boost the relationship between students and local business, involve local public schools in sustainability education projects, and enhance awareness of and use of local natural spaces. On a conceptual level, students also talked about the importance of having pride in your community, and the way that is fostered by involvement in public projects, places, and events – in essence, the commons. Ultimately, this project built relationships, generated good ideas, and created momentum for building sustainability through an awareness of the importance of community, diversity, and commitment to place.

Attachments (in PDF format):

1. Poster as presented at the Annual IUP Undergraduate Scholars Forum, and the Indiana Community Wellness Fair
2. Minutes of planning meeting with community partner organization
3. Survey
4. Survey results, as disseminated to partner organization and community members
5. Agenda for final Sustainable Indiana event
6. Flyer for the final event
7. News about the ATP project at IUP