“Economic Development in Appalachian Kentucky: Perception, Reality, and Reimagining Our Region”

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PROJECT FOCUS: This project will focus on an analysis of major factors in economic distress and related social development in Appalachian Kentucky, where students will conduct surveys of community partners to determine perceived obstacles to economic development, including negative perceptions of the region, and then conduct statistical research to better understand how reality compares to these perceived obstacles, and develop plans for improving the local economy and perceptions of the area.

PROJECT DETAILS:

**RAPP 300, Seminar Regional Issues I, Luttrull**

**Community Partner(s):** The partners in this project will include the Rowan County (KY) Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Development agency (Rowan County, KY), and the KY League of Cities.

**Need:**

Rowan County, Kentucky is listed as an “at risk” area near “distressed” counties in Appalachia. Though it has managed to weather various economic and demographic storms, substantial room exists for improvement in Rowan County’s position. There is a need to better understand those factors that contribute to distress and barriers for economic development as well as those that are success oriented factors for development. Students will also assess how people in the area and surrounding regions view Rowan county and its economic viability. The project will face the challenges of effectively and comprehensively gathering data and input from community residents and organizations. There will be opportunities to share good analytical findings with community leaders and improve the prospects for future growth and understanding in small Appalachian communities.

Specifically, students will focus their efforts on understanding the perceptions of their area with regards to tourism. This is especially important given the recent controversy regarding County Clerk, Kim Davis, and the media circus that engulfed the region. These findings will allow the local community of Rowan County to address chronic unemployment, economic stagnation, demographic decline as well as the negative public perceptions that are both the result of and contributors to these economic and social problems. Students will then use this data to develop local development plans to enhance economic growth in the region. These plans will utilize student led efforts focusing on uniting public policy, business practices and public relations campaigns that will serve to improve the area and the region, especially in regards to tourism. These findings could then be used to eventually help the entire region of Appalachian Kentucky deal with similar limitations based upon flawed public perceptions of the region found both in the larger public and
among local inhabitants. Students will be encouraged to study the unconventional work of private groups such as “Kentucky for Kentucky” in Lexington, KY, that have succeeded in changing perceptions of the Bluegrass region through viral campaigns and creative initiatives.

Number and description of planned meetings with the community partner

There will be regular meetings with community partners at least monthly and with community members on a regular basis. The meetings will allow the community partners and members to have a regular update on the progress of the student projects, and to allow the community the opportunity to make suggestions to students about how to improve the clarity of their work. Open channels of communication will thus be maintained between the students and the community they will serve. Student groups will also meet directly with various members of community partners to conduct in-person interviews with stakeholders to gain a greater personal understanding of their dreams for Rowan County and the greater Appalachian region.

Concise overview of the project, including its central focus (10-12 sentences):

This project will take the students in RAPP 300 Seminar in Regional Issues I and educate them in core literature on Appalachia and provide a methodological foundation for applied research in communities in Appalachia. The students will read about the history and culture of the region and learn to study from a comparative regional standpoint the community and citizens who specifically are impacted by economic distress. The class will define a research project in the Rowan County area and broader region that will focus on conditions that limit economic and social development in the region. Perceived restraints on economic development will be compared to data from the target area. The data on the target area will be collected and analyzed. Then the local partner organizations and community leaders will be engaged and data collection brought to the community level. The findings will be analyzed and developed for presentation and shared with the community for input. The community partners and members will be provided with a more accurate picture of their economic circumstances and be able to make superior choices in the future. Students will then construct and present student-led action plans for improving the economic outlook and perception of the region. These plans will follow one of three tracks focusing on either public policy, business structure, or public relations. This multi-faced approach will allow students to utilize the variety of skills typically found among students in the RAPP program. This method will allow students enough freedom to act creatively and with flexibility, while providing sufficient structure to direct students towards workable goals.
Course Guidelines and Project Goals:

- Students will understand Appalachia as a region more thoroughly
- Students will gain knowledge in the history and culture of Appalachia
- Students will gain research skills and apply them
- Students will develop leadership skills
- Students will learn to work on a complex project as part of a team.
- Students will conduct an analytic project on Rowan County and surrounding region
- Students will develop action plans for community partners to improve the economic outlook and perception of the region
- Students will develop a poster for presentation
- Students will make a poster presentation at the Appalachian Studies Association annual conference

Project Impact: This project will have impact in the community studied (Rowan and region) and build a best-practices understanding of the factors of economic distress and analysis of strategies to overcome barriers to development. The community will better understand those factors limiting economic development and how to better achieve growth the region will be provided with creative proposals for improving the economic and social condition of the area, as well as improving the perception of the region by potential tourists. These proposals will combine public policy research with imaginative efforts designed to reconceive the general perception of the region. The community will be able to utilize the information provided to advocate for superior public and private sector action that will lead to superior economic development directed at alleviating unemployment, economic stagnation, and demographic decline. A superior perception of the region will help to foster not only tourism, but also shift in opinion among locals about the possibility of staying and thriving in the region.