

**Heirloom Seed Keepers and their Stories:
Growing community and sustainability through arts-based research**

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Final Report Narrative

Name of Project: Heirloom Seed Keepers and their Stories: Growing Community and Sustainability through arts-based research

Grant Period: Aug 1, 2012 to May 30, 2013

Grantee Name: University of North Georgia (formerly North Georgia College & State University)

Project Director: Rosann Kent, Director, Appalachian Studies Center and Dr. Chris Dockery, associate professor of art education

Description of Project:

One of the signature projects of the Appalachian Studies Center at University of North Georgia is *Saving Appalachian Gardens and Stories*, an initiative to grow, bank, and share heirloom seeds collected from the region. Seed donors were interviewed not only about the seed, but also about gardening traditions and foodways of Southern Appalachia.

The 2012-2013 Appalachian Teaching Project added an important dimension to SAGAS by incorporating a unique methodology for community-based research: arts-based inquiry. Students, with the help of community “gatekeepers”, located and interviewed seed savers in Lumpkin County, Georgia. Their analysis resulted in a visual representation of their research called a “communograph, a quilt-sized colorful display that artistically characterized not only the seed savers’ contributions of donated seeds and shared stories but also the circuitous connections and conversations that led to locating the cultural tradition bearers. The communograph was well received at four venues in northeast Georgia as well as the ASA Conference in Boone and invited viewers into a larger conversation about Appalachian foodways, heirloom gardening, and the significant role our community elders and their traditions have to play in educating our youth about sustainable practices. This exchange of knowledge and narrative also promoted positive interactions between new and long-term residents of Lumpkin County. By sharing the assets of cultural heritage, students will continue to build social bridges that will contribute to sustainability of our community.

Activities:

In addition to the conference presentation, poster, and other activities, please include details regarding the following requirements from the Scope of Work:

- **Activities with community partners.**
 - Building trust began at the partner level. Professors met with Rebecca Shirley, assistant director of the Dahlonega Downtown Development Authority and sponsor of the Farmers Market. Professors Kent and Dockery met with Ms. Shirley on two occasions in the summer before the students returned. Ms. Shirley stressed the importance of respecting the wishes of the farmers if they did not want to be interviewed on the day of the actual swap. She also preferred not to release the contact information for the farmers without their permission. We reassured her that the students would honor her requests. She then assisted the Center in getting a vendor permit for the season.

- Students organized two seed swaps on Sept. 22 and Sept. 29 at the Farmers Market (See Seed brochure). They shared more than 100 seed packets from the 2012 demonstration garden.
- **Presentations of student research to community groups other than the primary partner**
 - [18th Annual North Georgia Research Conference](#). Students presented the arts-based research methodology during a panel.
 - [Social Sustainability in North Georgia](#). The team leaders of the ATP project presented the research and communograph to the Institute for Environmental Spatial Analysis (IESA) at the University's Gainesville Campus. The series highlighted community environmental principles and the current events driving them.
 - [Art Steam Project at Lumpkin County High School](#). Dr. Chris Dockery & four art education students who helped design the communograph developed an arts based curriculum on "Heirloom Seed Keepers and Their Stories" and presented it to the during the lunch hour. They presented 3 artmaking stations for one day a week during the 10 week project. Over 150 students participated in seed packet making, book making and basket making and over 500 students were exposed to the project through presentation and educational materials.
 - **"Preserving Appalachia"** The communograph was displayed and presented when the Center hosted an exhibition of works by Lumpkin County High School Art Class at the Vickery House. Works from 25 local high school students were featured and over 50 visitors were in attendance at the reception.
 - **Bear on the Square**. Students and community concluded the ATP project and celebrated their accomplishments by displaying communograph and sharing seeds at the Bear on the Square Music Festival held in and around Dahlonega's Historic Public Square. Students prepared and shared more than 300 seedpackets and also garnered a notebook of leads regarding seedsavers they were not aware of.
- **links to any videos or social media that show the students interacting with their community partner(s)**
 - Students' blog on the Heirloom Seed project and their interactions in the community.
 - [Fall 2012](#)
 - [Spring 2013](#)
 - Appalachian Studies' blog entry on interaction with seedkeepers.
 - [Keeping Culture Alive](#)

Project Outcomes:

- A team of seven students presented at the Appalachian Teaching Project in Washington.
- A team of five students presented a poster session at Appalachian Studies Conference in Boone.
- Two students co-authored a scholarly article which was accepted by *Papers and Pubs: A Southeastern Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research*. It will appear in the upcoming issue.

- Students presented their research and displayed the communograph at five local venues: Lumpkin County High School, Northeast Georgia History Center, Chestatee Library, Library Technology Center at UNG, Environmental Studies Club at UNG's Gainesville campus and the North Georgia Research Conference.
- More than 500 seedpackets were created from recycled paper bags, filled with seeds grown in the demonstration garden and distributed at community events.
- 5 gatekeepers worked extensively with students to help them understand community dynamics and build trust with the old-timers.
- More than 20 potential seedkeepers were identified. Eleven agreed to be interviewed and share seeds and stories.
- Communograph became a "traveling exhibition" for four local (and non-art) venues: Lumpkin County High School, Northeast Georgia History Center, Chestatee Regional Library, Library Technology Center at UNG.

Problems Encountered:

Authentic, community-based research that results in systemic change is, by definition, a non-linear and time consuming process that cannot be completed in one semester, or even in one academic year. The problems encountered are as follows:

- Although gatekeepers were identified by professors before course started, they (and we) did not completely understand the task at hand. For example, some gatekeepers sincerely thought they knew seedkeepers but, upon investigation, discovered they had stopped gardening and seeds were not maintained by family. (See Letter to Gatekeeper.)
- Students and gatekeepers were not able to identify seedkeepers in all of the targeted communities, e.g. only 7 out of 16 districts.
- Students' research was concentrated in a few communities among a hand-full of seedkeepers.
- Students were frustrated with the time-consuming process of building trust and relationships in the pervasive insider-outsider community dynamic.
- Students were frustrated with the non-linear nature of the research. For example, when students followed up on a gatekeeper's lead, they discovered the information often folded back on itself and pointed different students with different gatekeepers to the same seed keeper. Accustomed to following a grading rubric, students expressed anxiety about interviewing their "quota" of seedkeepers as well as failure to identify seedkeepers in some areas of the county. (See recommendations section for solutions to the problems.)

Program Continuation and Sustainability:

The program will not only be continued but the sustainability outlook is extremely positive.

- Not only with the Appalachian Studies Center continue this program, but the leadership has revised its strategic plan to incorporate place-based pedagogy as its central teaching philosophy for its Minor in Appalachian Studies.
- Campus and community are extremely interested in social and environmental sustainability: issues of food security, food deserts, food safety (GMOs).
- This semester one of the ATP students volunteered to plant the Center's first spring garden with heirloom potatoes and carrots gathered from the previous semester's ATP project.

- Students enroll at a record rate, both in the minor and co- curricular activities. They have revived a club, *North Georgia Students for Appalachia*, elected officers, and planned activities for 2013-2014 that complement the program. For example, using the popular fiction and film, *Hunger Games*, students choose as their slogan “*Prepare for the Games: Learn to create a sustainable future for Appalachia.*” Club officers plan to use the heirloom seed project to inspire and challenge their fellow students to create a different world than the dystopian world featured in fiction and film. Likewise, community volunteers have devoted many hours of physical labor and horticultural wisdom as well as donated much needed soil amendments and gardening tools.
- Internal partnerships with the university’s departments of visual arts and biology have created a synergy that the Center could not have accomplished on its own without the impetus of the ATP program; i.e. Students from the biology department volunteered to install a beehive and pollinator garden to complement the heirloom seed demonstration garden. Students from the art department volunteered to photograph, exhibit and develop artistic representations of the program’s research.
- The ATP has enhanced Community partnerships and opened our eyes to possibilities for other partnerships with were previously unconsidered. For example, the high school agricultural teacher has expressed interest in partnering with the Center for the upcoming ATP project.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Recommendations:

Professors Kent and Dockery believe that many of the problems encountered could be mitigated by implementing these improvements and plan to implement them in Year 2 of the project.

- Devise a visual system to capture social networks in community. Students, gatekeepers, seedkeepers and interested community members need to be able to see at a glance, who has been contacted, who needs a follow up call or visit, and what needs to be documented.
- Professors will conduct an orientation on how to do field research and students with standardized intake forms for both memory and seed banking.
- Professors will reach out to gatekeepers in African American and Native American communities and invite their participation.
- Project will begin earlier in semester. For example, the ATP students from 2012 will organize a gatekeeper meet and greet within the first two weeks of the term for the incoming 2013 ATP students. This tactic should facilitate earlier start of interviews and leave more time to uncover seedkeepers in other districts and cultures.

Conclusions:

This project grew exponentially! We never anticipated the amount of community interest, much less student interest. We also never anticipated the richness that a true inter disciplinary effort could create.

- *Appalachian Studies Center.* These students enrolled in *Intro to Appalachia* conducted the primary research and most of the community presentations.
- *Art Education.* These students worked two weeks ahead of the Intro students so they could learn (and then teach) art techniques for conducting the communograph. Art education students also wrote a curriculum and presented activities at the local high school.
- *Art majors.* These students created the seedkeeper brochure. (See attached)

- Sustainability Student Group at Dablonga Campus. These students embraced the project as if it were their own, providing garden labor and publicity. They invited 120 fifth graders to tour the garden.
- Environmental Student Group at Gainesville Campus.
- Service fraternity. These students provided hours of gardening labor and made seed packets for distribution.

Perhaps most importantly, the ATP project opened our own eyes as to the Center's strengths. In fact, we are in the process of revisiting the emphasis of the Minor to position *Saving Appalachian Gardens and Stories* as the central feature for place-based pedagogy.

DRAFT Through experiential learning, research, and creative activities, students emerge as leaders, scholars, and activists, empowered to effect positive community-driven change, both in Appalachia and abroad.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to be both changer and the changed!

Attachments (in PDF format):

Include such items as the following:

- Flyers, text for PSA announcements, etc.
 - See "Digging Your Roots" flyer
 - See "Seedkeeper brochure"
 - See "Seedkeeper Letter"
- Photographs showing students in action
 - [See students' blog](#)
- PR such as newspaper articles, documentation of radio spots, etc.
 - [UNG news release on ATP project](#)
 - [Social sustainability speaker series](#)
 - [Gainesville Times article](#): "Heirloom seed project grows with community input"
 - Appalachian Studies' blog entry on interaction with seedkeepers.
 - [Keeping Culture Alive](#)