

**Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI)  
Local, State, Regional, and National Partnerships to Build Community Capacity  
and Diversify Coalfield Economies in Southwest Virginia**

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**PROJECT FOCUS:** Radford University will collaborate with the Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI), a multi-member grassroots organization comprised of several Southwest Virginia counties, to collect river stories from individuals who have grown up along the Clinch River.

**PROJECT DETAILS:**

**Course Number, Name, and Instructor:** Radford University's 2016-17 Appalachian Teaching Project class will be APST495/595: Research in Appalachia and will be taught in the fall of 2016 by Dr. Theresa Burriss, Chair of Appalachian Studies/Director of the Appalachian Regional & Rural Studies Center.

**Community Partner(s):** Clinch River Valley Initiative, St. Paul Tomorrow, Inc., Friends of Southwest Virginia, 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 of Southwest Virginia in communities that are distressed or at-risk, as classified by the latest ARC data for 2017 fiscal year. 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. After participating in a CRVI steering committee meeting and subsequent general member meeting on Thursday, May 26, in Cleveland, VA, Dr. Burriss gained a deeper understanding of the group's work and needs. She then talked with members of the Environmental Education Action Group and the Downtown Revitalization, Marketing, and Entrepreneurship Action Group, who shared their need to obtain river stories to augment their downtown revitalization and regional tourism efforts. The stories collected by Radford University students will result in a book that will be sold at Clinch River venues and online to locals and tourists alike. 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. This 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).

**Number and description of planned meetings with the community partner:** Given the geographical distance between the City of Radford and Russell and

Wise Counties, an introductory meeting on September 8 and a follow-up meeting on September 22 will occur via Skype. Students will travel with Dr. Burriss to the Clinch River Valley on the following dates for meetings with community partners and to collect river stories: October 1, October 29, and November 12. At least one of these dates will include canoeing/kayaking down parts of the Clinch River. At this point, CRVI meeting dates have not been scheduled for the fall or winter. Once the dates have been established, RU students will present at one CRVI meeting.

**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 new 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.

The Clinch River Valley Initiative fits this description because partners include 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:

1. Create a state park
2. Increase access points
3. Monitor and increase water quality
4. Offer environmental education to people of all ages
5. Revitalize and market downtowns along the river, as well as boost entrepreneurial opportunities

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 river stories from residents who have lived on the Clinch River most if not all their lives. In the *Clinch River Valley Initiative Action Plan*, ([www.clinchriverva.com](http://www.clinchriverva.com) Jan. 2016), 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."

### **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 develop a broad inventory of community assets, both cultural and natural, as they interact with CRVI partners and study the 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. Moreover, they will witness effective grassroots collaboration with the multiple stakeholders that make up CRVI. According to Fisher and Smith (2012), multi-issue grassroots organizations stand the best chance of long-term survival and success, contrasting them with single-issue groups. CRVI does incorporate 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 river 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 Van Manen's *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, which highlights a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to interviewing. Such preparation will enable the students to more sensitively engage with informants as they elicit their lived experiences on the Clinch. Additionally, Dr. Burriss plans for the students to canoe and/or kayak several sections of the Clinch. Only through such place-based educational opportunities can students come to better know a place.
- 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. These stories 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. However, they both came to realize "the importance of place as a source of personal identity and motivating force in local and regional resistance struggles" (vii). 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 the Clinch Valley multiple times and will conduct Skype discussions before the physical meetings.
- B. Presentation of research at the ATP conference in Washington, D.C., on December 2-3, 2016.
- 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 at Virginia Tech in March 2017.
- D. Participation in a panel discussion at the Appalachian Studies Association's Annual Conference at Virginia Tech in March 2017.

### **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 at least one more year if not more. CRVI's goals are ambitious, which necessitates a long-term commitment. While this year's ATP efforts are focused on collecting river stories, subsequent years may involve other needs, which will be determined by the community partners and what they have achieved on their own and/or with other partners.
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 once again enjoy the experience of presenting their work before other ATP schools and ARC officials at the December 2016 ATP Conference. They will come to appreciate how their work in Southwest Virginia, and particularly the Clinch Valley, fits into a broader network that focuses on the sustainability and capacity building of all Appalachian communities, no matter their differences or similarities.

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

- Dr. Burriss hopes that Radford University students’ participation in the Clinch River Valley Initiative will result in increased community pride, identity, and sense of place. Additionally, she hopes the river story book will provide communities with a saleable item to help with marketing the Clinch Valley to regional, national, and international tourists, and she hopes the river story 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.
- As required in the final report, Dr. Burriss will include testimony from CRVI, as well as other partners involved in CRVI’s efforts, to document the impact of Radford University’s participation in achieving parts of CRVI’s goals 4 and 5.
- 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 the river story collecting, students will gain knowledge from Clinch Valley residents to aid the students in their cultural competency and sensitivity, attributes that will serve them well no matter where they live and work.
- As RU students gather river stories, 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

- Appalachian Regional Commission. *Investing in Appalachia's Future: The Appalachian Regional Commission's Five-Year Strategic Plan for Capitalizing on Appalachia's Opportunities*. Boone, NC: Destination by Design, 2016.
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