

**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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## **Final Report Narrative**

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

**Grant Period:** January 1, 2016 – June 30, 2017

**Grantee Name:** Radford University

**Project Director:** Theresa L. Burriss

### **Description of Project**

Radford University (RU) students enrolled in APST495: Research in Appalachia collaborated with the Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI), a multi-member grassroots organization made up of several Southwest Virginia counties, to collect river stories from individuals who have grown up along the Clinch River. 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. Such personal stories add to the communities' efforts to attract tourists and provide culturally rich experiences for tourists, thereby contributing to economic long-term sustainability.

### **Activities**

Given the geographical distance between Radford and St. Paul, the RU students conducted both Skype and conference calls with CRVI members at the start of the fall semester. These calls solidified CRVI's goals for the students and enabled the students to meet, at least virtually, some of the key stakeholders.

Later, the students made three physical trips to the Clinch River Valley with the first occurring on October 1 and the remaining two on October 29 and November 12. On these three Saturdays, the students engaged in the oral history collecting and conducted a total of 13 interviews.

At the Appalachian Teaching Project conference in December 2016, the students gave a 15-minute oral presentation, as well as displayed a poster on their project. They provided the same oral presentation at the Appalachian Studies Association conference, held at Virginia Tech in March of 2017, along with two other ATP schools, Appalachian State and Bradford.

Due to scheduling conflicts, only one student, Caroline Leggett, was able to present the ATP group's work at the February CRVI meeting, held at Sugar Hill Brewery in St. Paul. Please see attachment for information on the event.

Another student, Celeste Chorniak, and Theresa Burriss presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Clinch Environmental Education Symposium on May 13 in St. Paul. See here for flyer: <http://mailchi.mp/4cd8b860dc69/may-18-crvi-meeting-reminder-other-events-1207873?e=90d154df42>.

For photos of the students in action, please see attachments.

### **Project Outcomes**

- Based on CRVI's expressed goals for RU's ATP students, the students began the process of collecting, recording, and transcribing river stories from older residents in the valley, with 13 collected to date. The raw transcriptions, along with the audio, will be delivered to our CRVI partners this summer once everything has been compiled onto a thumb drive. 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).
- Not only did the students acquire a greater appreciation for the ecological, economic, and social diversity in Southwest Virginia by traveling outside the New River Valley, where Radford is located, they established new, and I dare say enduring, relationships with several CRVI members. Two of the members opened their homes to the students, who spent the night and gained a deeper understanding of their lives in the Clinch River Valley.

- The students bolstered their public speaking skills, their research skills, and their ability to interact across a broad generational spectrum.
- CRVI will be delivered what the members asked of the RU ATP students, namely oral histories or river stories.
- RU ATP students contributed to CRVI's mission to showcase and celebrate the richness of the Clinch River Valley. 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. Such personal stories add to the communities' efforts to attract tourists and provide culturally rich experiences for tourists.

### **Problems Encountered**

Fortunately, we did not have to deviate from our original proposal. However, I will share that the geographic distance between Radford and the Clinch River Valley does pose challenges. Students had to request off work on the Saturdays we traveled because Saturday was the only day of the week when everyone was available.

### **Program Continuation and Sustainability**

Radford University's ATP class will continue the collaboration with CRVI in the upcoming 2017-18 academic year. Lou Wallace, a CRVI member and Russell County Board of Supervisors member, has requested that the students focus on Dante and several elder residents who have lived most if not all of their lives there. Students will conduct oral histories with the residents, but also learn about Dante residents' desire to build a community center. Collaboration may be possible for this endeavor, too.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations: "What changes did you hope would occur in the community as a result of the project?"**

We anticipated that the river stories would contribute to the existing strong pride in the region, which we believe they did and will even more once they're published in a book to be sold at venues along the river and online. Fortunately, we did have opportunities to highlight the work in different settings and with different audiences in the Clinch River Valley.

Recently, I became aware of Rebecca Solnit's atlas books, multi-genre endeavors that showcase different urban environments. I would like to see the same type of creativity applied to a Clinch River Valley atlas book that could also be produced online in an interactive form using GIS and other technology. Perhaps future RU ATP students could contribute to such a work's completion. I also would like RU students to create QR codes that paddlers, fishers, and hikers can access along the river and trails to hear clips of interviewees' stories.

**Attachments (in PDF format)**

Please see attached.