

# **A Model for Facilitating Campus-Community Partnerships with Small Towns at the University of Minnesota, Morris**

By John Hamerlinck, Minnesota Campus Compact

---

*" . . . once you've seen one rural community, you've seen just one rural community"*  
- Chuck Fluharty, President, Rural Policy Research Institute<sup>1</sup>

## **A Continuum of Rural**

The danger in talking about “rural service-learning,” may be that people might infer that by putting things in a *rural* box, that certain characteristics are common to all rural experiences. As the above quote from Chuck Fluharty reminds us, however, *rural* is a very large and diverse box. As Betty Rios noted, rurality may be a concept beyond definition.<sup>2</sup>

Service-learning also has a multitude of variations; the most common of which is a partnership between a faculty member, representing one institution, and another nonprofit institution, usually a K-12 school, local government entity or a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Projects most frequently involve students engaging in site-based volunteering intended to serve agency “clients” or K-12 students.

Many rural colleges and universities are located in more populous regional centers. Far fewer are located in small or very small towns. According to the U.S. census Bureau, 21% of the population lives in rural areas. This represents over 59 million people; 46 million of whom do not live in any town. Nearly 5 million people live in towns between 1,000 and 2,500 in population. Almost 4 million live in towns with less than 1,000 residents. <sup>3</sup>

If colleges and universities are interested in serving all rural communities, then we may need to re-imagine our notions of what service-learning can look like. Small towns with very few institutions should still be able to benefit from the engagement of students and faculty, despite the lack of institutions to serve as community partners.

Small towns face a variety of unique challenges. They often meet those challenges not via institutions, but through the efforts of informal associations. As Tocqueville observed:

"Americans of all ages, all stations of life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations...In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others."<sup>4</sup>

This case study explores a model of service-learning that effectively meets small towns where they are, recognizing that partnerships can thrive without rigid

institutional constructs if they tap into the passionate leadership of motivated citizens. It may not always look like service-learning by some definitions, but real service is taking place, as is real reflective learning.

### **The Center for Small Towns**

Established in 1995, the Center for Small Towns (CST) at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM)<sup>5</sup>, creates learning opportunities and conducts applied research providing tremendous value to the small towns in its western Minnesota region. The Center's work focuses on towns under 5,000 in population.

The CST approaches its work with a keen understanding of the importance of reciprocity. They are, after all, the Center for Small Towns, *not* the center for *the study of* small towns. The CST has facilitated the opportunity for more than 1,500 University of Minnesota, Morris students to serve over 200 communities. The CST's "Adapting to Change" project which included 13 outreach projects with the Morris community (population, 5,068), was the recipient of Minnesota Campus Compact's 2006 Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Partnership Award for Campus-Community Collaboration.

Students engage with the CST in a number of ways. Some may have community-based work-study positions. Others may do internships or be enrolled in IS 3110 - Rural Community Field Project, the CST's variable credit independent study course. Regardless of how the students come to the CST, they all follow strict guidelines for respectful, reciprocal community engagement, and all participate in guided reflection with CST staff.

One of the programs run by the CST is the Small Town Faculty and Student Fellows Program. The program offers faculty and student fellowships for community-based research projects. Projects taken on through the program address rural issues, such as creating a plan for collaborative school bus routing between rural school districts, or assessing a county's local food systems.

### **"The Group"**

Because the CST has developed trust and countless relationships throughout the region's communities, requests for help do not necessarily come from institutional sources. The CST is presently involved in efforts to revitalize the downtown of Wheaton, Minnesota (population, 1,422). Wheaton is about 35 miles northwest of the Morris campus.

This campus-community partnership doesn't necessarily fit the conventional institutional framework for service-learning. This particular partnership with Wheaton is between the CST and an informal association of local women who wanted to improve the look of Wheaton's downtown. Samantha Bruno, a UMM student who has been working on the project refers her community partners as "The Group."

The Group was concerned that the community's downtown, with its abundance of vacant store fronts and its share of dilapidated buildings, needed to be improved both aesthetically and economically. They wanted the work to begin as soon as possible because the town was hosting an all-class reunion and a 100 year town anniversary in a few months.

Though it boasts a statue of the world's largest Mallard duck, Wheaton has fallen on some hard times. It has seen a significant population decrease over the past two decades. Traverse County, of which it is the county seat, is the least populated of Minnesota's 87 counties, losing 14.6% of its population since 2000. Wheaton's median resident age is 47.6 years (compared to Minnesota's overall median age of 35.4 years). The city's median household income is around 67% of the state average.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these challenges, the community has a dedicated leadership base including The Group, who contacted Community Program Specialist, David Fluegel at the CST. Fluegel made calls to a number of people he knew in Wheaton, in an effort to better understand the scale and capacity issues surrounding the potential partnership. He then helped to facilitate the work in Wheaton through the Fellows program. Fluegel brought in Michael Eble, Assistant Professor of Studio Art and Economics/Management faculty member Thomas Gausman. In addition to these Faculty Fellows, he engaged Art major Samantha Bruno, who was eager to take on the project after finishing her first year at UMM.

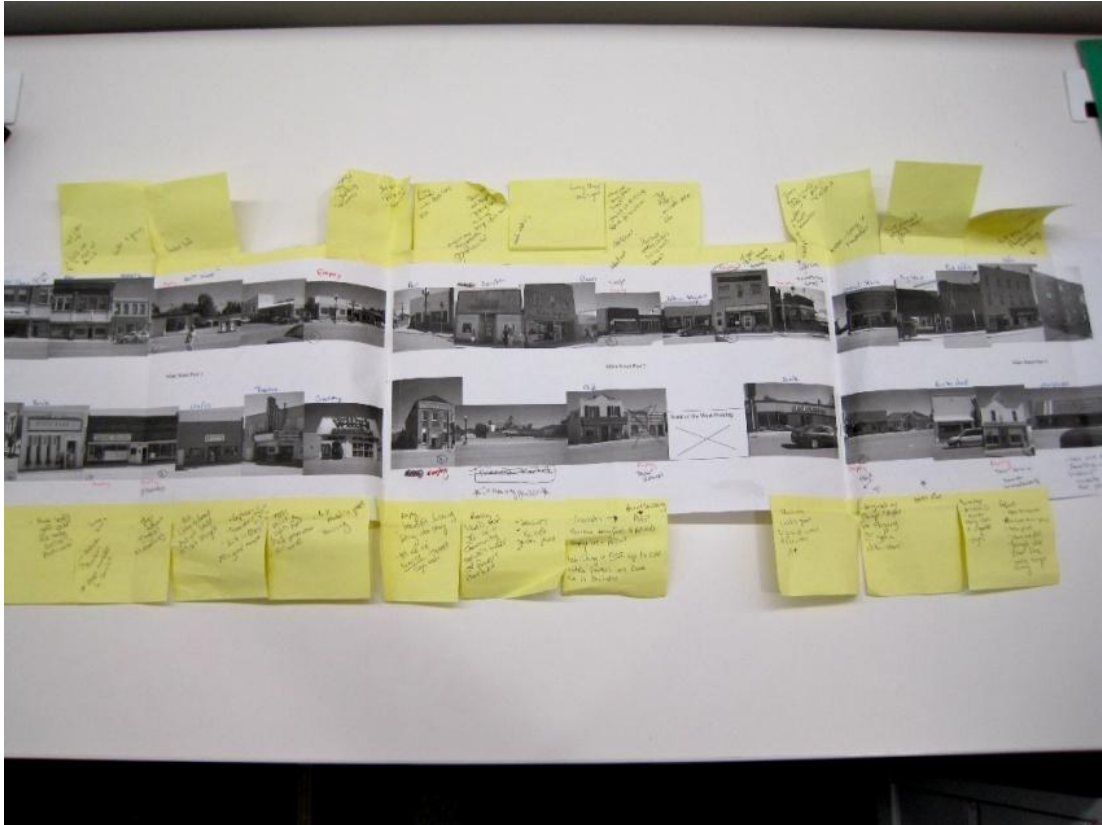
Bruno and Eble met with The Group in Wheaton, and went over the list of buildings that were in need of help and the outcomes The Group was looking to achieve. Bruno photographed every building on Wheaton's main street and recreated the business district on paper and then conducted research on rural community and downtown development.



Samantha Bruno (standing right) and The Group

Bruno described her work as applied research on the front end, followed by building trust and presenting people with options, so that the work was collaborative as opposed to hired gun 'experts' telling the community what to do. She worked with Eble on creating a color palette for the buildings to be painted with local volunteer help. Gausman conducted research to offer

recommendations on economic revitalization. Bruno also created a portfolio of resources including funding sources, design tools, historic preservation tips and examples of “best practices” to which The Group could refer when implementing projects that emerged from the recommendations. Among Bruno’s own recommendations was moving an existing community garden, unknown to many people in the community, to a new, more visible location near the town’s center.



Downtown Wheaton with improvement options

Local residents have implemented many of the aesthetic recommendations presented by their UMM partners. When asked about the biggest challenges she encountered, Bruno said that as an artist this experience reminded her that sometimes you have to adapt your artistic vision to align with a shared community vision. “If you’re doing public art you have to get a better understanding of what the public wants to see.”

Bruno also stressed that she learned a lot about the importance of listening. As an outsider (“If you weren’t born there you’re always an outsider.”) from there coming in to offer help, she found that listening was the best way to gain peoples’ trust. She also learned quite a bit about human nature and small town culture. “People want things to be different, but they are reluctant to embrace change.”

She also learned about the power of dedicated people who are passionate and committed to doing something to improve their community. “People were excited to be around others who shared the same goals.”

## Scale and Capacity

Wheaton is just one of many communities where the CST has supported community development endeavors.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes that support happens through comprehensive community initiatives with numerous institutional partners. In other cases great ideas emerge from small groups of citizens who need a little knowledge to help bridge the gap between *talking* about doing something to improve their quality of life and *doing* something.

According to Fluegel, sometimes smaller projects at the CST involving just one student sometimes lead to larger course-based service-learning projects. Larger projects can also yield new ideas and new opportunities for individual students to explore and develop.

Rural America is full of small towns whose lack of capacity to readily mobilize classes or even teams of students, does not mean that they don't long for people to help present options for sustaining vibrant, healthy communities. Trust builders like David Fluegel and Samantha Bruno are critical when working in a community development atmosphere that often operates more on personal relationships and associations than it does on contractual agreements between institutions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fluharty, Charles. "Building a national rural policy: One town at a time." Montana Business Quarterly - Winter, 2001. Retrieved online at <http://www.entrepreneur.com/tradejournals/article/83995459.html>

<sup>2</sup> See Rios, Betty Rose. "Rural" -- A Concept Beyond Definition? ERIC Digest, ED 296820. Las Cruces, NM: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1988. 6 p. <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-929/concept.htm>

<sup>3</sup> [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=01000US&-box\\_head\\_nbr=GCT-P1&-ds\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SF1\\_U&-format=US-1](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-box_head_nbr=GCT-P1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-format=US-1)

<sup>4</sup> Tocqueville, Democracy in America (Arthur Goldhammer, trans.; Olivier Zunz, ed.) (The Library of America, 2004) ISBN 1-931082-54-5

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.morris.umn.edu/cst/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.city-data.com/city/Wheaton-Minnesota.html>

<sup>7</sup> For example, the past few years the CST has been working with various partners in Hoffman, MN (pop., 672). Hoffman is experiencing a renaissance of sorts, thanks in great part to its part-time economic development guru, a retired businesswoman named Muriel Krusemark. UMM students have been instrumental in working with Krusemark to create amenities in Hoffman's downtown such as The Galleria, a micro-business incubator housing 23 small businesses. Students also helped to develop the community's Healthcare Mall, through feasibility research, grant writing and developing a case for support presented to the City. So far the facility's tenants include a massage therapist, a podiatrist, an audiologist and a chiropractor. For more see: <http://www.morris.umn.edu/newsevents/view.php?itemID=7057> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEdIqLKTGMs>