



# Urban Studies, Students, and Communities: An Ideal Partnership—A Case Study of Urban Studies Service-Learning

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### **Abstract**

**This article explores the implementation and results of a service-learning based Urban Studies program course, the student expectations at the beginning of the course, and the student feedback at the end of the course. Through detailed explanation and examples of the live community needs, in multiple communities, addressed in this course and the resulting student projects, this article presents the case for service-learning as a vibrant, efficient, and effective pedagogy for use within Urban Studies programs. Specifically, this article explores service-learning pedagogy as, perhaps, a uniquely effective and satisfying tool that enhances the educative process for students and communities alike. Additionally, this article explores the enhanced project effectiveness and external outreach realized by partnering not only with communities, but also with multiple institutions of higher education, simultaneously, in order to achieve project(s) success. This article also includes, and explores, the results of the pre and post course student experience surveys, as well as community feedback, and presents comparative data in which multiple curriculum formats, including lecture and workshops, are weighed against service-learning curriculum prepared and presented in the course examined in this article.**

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### **Introduction**

Traditionally most colleges and universities attempt to develop within our students the necessary skills and knowledge to become life-long learners and effective, contributing members of society (Angelo & Cross). As educators, we have come to view ourselves as a

community of professionals who are committed to teaching and scholarship to enhance student learning and to benefit communities and the individuals our students ultimately serve (Mentkowski, 2000). There has also been an on-going discussion in the educational realm about student service-learning, coupled with community involvement and university outreach. While service-learning is still evolving and has not settled into a shared language, it has established a set of common ideas and theories as well as generally accepted approaches. One important characteristic is that it be reciprocal in nature; that is, facilitating a service-experience with a learning experience. Taking reciprocity one step further, the author will examine an integration of university outreach and student engagement that transformed knowledge into partnerships beneficial to the community, the university, the students and the faculty. This paper explores an innovative multi-disciplinary collaboration between two institutions and community partnerships that jumpstarted the connection between learning and service for students.

### Background

Philip Kotler argues that in our global economy, almost all places are in trouble; some more than others. For example, small cities and towns, often they find themselves too dependent on one main source of revenue; when the industry or company dries up, so does the place. Out-migration follows with young people leaving after their high school graduation. In turn, this further weakens the tax base needed to support schools, public services, and aging infrastructure. More problematic, Kotler explains, is the lack the resources to bring about a recovery (Kotler, et al., 1993). For these reasons, the breakdown of small communities has become commonplace today. But what can be done? Where do these communities start? Communities have the need and universities have the means to improve community viability through student engagement. South central Minnesota's landscape is dotted with an abundance of small towns. Like most small Midwestern towns, they are tied to a shrinking agricultural base, dwindling Local Government Aid,<sup>1</sup> and lackluster economic growth.

Many of these towns are located within close proximity to the campus of the Minnesota State University Mankato (MSU), which is forging town-gown partnerships between university research teams and business, industry, and communities. A major university goal is to integrate research, teaching, and service for students as well as faculty. Much of this collaboration is intended to make the university a more effective partner in community building and to stimulate what Angelo and Cross (1993) define as good teaching and learning that also results in demonstrable outcomes. In this case, the partnerships focused on helping five small towns identify the unique attributes that set them apart from other towns and to subsequently incorporate these elements into branding and marketing strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> In Minnesota the state government gives a subsidy to cities known as Local Government Aid.

## Minnesota State University Mankato and South Central College

Minnesota State University Mankato is located approximately 85 miles southwest of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul and is one of the institutions of higher learning that comprise MnSCU.<sup>2</sup> Among the university's goals are "...increase[ing] the quantity and quality of service to the state, region, and global community through collaborations, partnerships, and opportunities for cultural enrichment and continuous learning."<sup>3</sup> MSU's Urban & Regional Studies Institute (URSI) has been preparing students for applied professional careers in cities as managers and administrators, planners, economic development directors, and community development specialists for over 40 years. It is a program in which every level of coursework involves some sort of applied work or participation in the field. Students and faculty in the program work with surrounding communities to develop plans for everything from traffic studies to strategic marketing. It is the nature, tradition, and vision of URSI to prepare students academically, professionally, and practically.

South Central College (SCC) is a two-year comprehensive community and technical college located in southern Minnesota with campuses in North Mankato and Faribault. The Colleges' Graphic Production Program prepares students to enter the printing/graphics and publishing industry, the second largest manufacturing industry in Minnesota. Since 2003, SCC's graphic students have collaborated with URSI students to complete real-world service-learning projects. In addition, the linkages between the two institutions and courses are interesting and noteworthy.

## The Service-Learning Projects

The author teaches URSI's combined graduate and undergraduate *Public Information & Involvement* class; a hands on immersive class, designed to help future public sector managers understand how to develop a strong and compelling image for a city/town and to stimulate public awareness that instills a sense of pride of place in community residents. In the classroom, students learn about making public presentations, differentiating between public relations and marketing, and effectively engaging the media in community events and initiatives. The end result is to incorporate this knowledge into specific applied service-learning projects (hereafter referred to as studios). Studios allow urban studies students to discover ways to connect what they learn in the classroom to the world outside of MSU and allow faculty to explore new ways to link campus and community.

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<sup>2</sup> MnSCU, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, is a collection of some 62 technical and community colleges as well as the state colleges and universities.

<sup>3</sup> MSU Goals. Accessed 7 Feb. 2007, available from <http://www.mnsu.edu/supersite/about/mission.html>

SCC's *Applied Graphics Production* class is designed to introduce students to the graphics production workplace and, in turn, use their printing skills to work on designated assignments. Production theories such as work flow, plant layout, OSHA regulations and other theories used by industry are discussed. Cost accounting and estimating projects are assigned for students to solve both manually and with the aid of a computer.

In the spring of 2003, a studio project engaged students and faculty from MSU and SCC in their first service-learning partnership with a city in south-central Minnesota. The goal was to raise public awareness about leadership in local government and its significance on city services. The project, called "Building Communities...It's No Small Chore,"<sup>4</sup> sought to demonstrate excellence in professional city management and its effect on successful communities. Five years earlier (1998), an F3 tornado churned across south-central Minnesota, descending into the Minnesota River Valley, and cut a mile-wide path of destruction through the city of Saint Peter. Saint Peter has a population of 10,000 and also serves as the county seat for Nicollet County. In the aftermath, the city worked diligently toward renewal. Its rebuilding success provided URSI students with a real-world example on which to build a public awareness campaign and initiate collaboration with SCC.

URSI students began by researching how Saint Peter had reinstated city services, and rebuilt its infrastructure, parks, and historic buildings. Working with the International City/County Management Association's (ICMA) Tool Kit, students produced public service announcements for area newspapers and radio stations, assembled before and after digital photos and wrote narratives on how strong leadership, a high degree of professionalism, dedicated employees and a supportive citizenry helped Saint Peter to not just survive, but grow and prosper. Next, URSI enlisted the help of SCC. Together, they designed a brochure that showcased Saint Peter's rebound. In the fall of that year, the author was invited to ICMA's national conference to share the outcomes of this service-learning project. Later it would expand into four more projects with similar dynamics.

By 2005, another small community near MSU approached the author about a slightly different type of collaborative service-learning project. In this instance, city officials were concerned with survival issues, such as competition with other towns, growth and tourism. They sought MSU's community connection to help them assess the underlying dynamics of their dilemma, and, to develop a marketing plan.

An important aspect of developing a marketing plan is to identify the unique attributes that set a town apart from others and, then, analyze whether competitive advantage exists over other communities in the region. Similar to marketing a product in business, the first step was to establish an identity for Janesville in order to attract the targeted audience. The targeted

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<sup>4</sup> Resources were also provided by the International City/County Management Assn. and permission was granted to use their slogan title.

audience in this case was prospective residents, businesses, and tourists. The identity (or “who are we”) stage began with URSI students researching questions about the community’s demographics, location, economy, physical assets, and quality of life through interviews, field trips, and the Internet.

Under the direction of the author, student teams conducted the above research, prepared written narratives, and gathered photos as part of a citywide branding and marketing campaign. This left another important dynamic, relevant to the situation, remaining—coining a slogan. McEachern (2006) says even the most successful brands need to establish an emotional connection in order to translate the facts gathered during the research phase into the emotional sparks that can bring a brand to life. The discovery of a photo of the town’s main street—one in 1907 and then, reproducing another in 2005—tied perfectly to the *Preserving the Past, Building for the Future*, slogan which appeared on the Janesville marketing brochure cover.

Under the direction of the SCC graphic’s instructor, Applied Production teams proceeded to work on layout, design and printing the brochure. The demonstrable outcome of this collaborative service-learning project was a 12-page full color marketing brochure for the city of Janesville, MN, and recognition by the broadcast and print media.

In the fall of 2006, the third city of New Prague, located 45 miles southwest of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul sought URSI and SCC’s help. The goal was to build a unique public awareness campaign, promoting the city’s extensive park and recreational opportunities. While the city’s extensive park system was one of its greatest assets, few citizens had a clear understanding of what it encompassed. For example within the communities 3.68 square miles, there are ten city parks. These are in addition to the seven school recreational sites. City parks range in size from 143 acres (Memorial Park) to 2.2 acres (Heritage Park). Amenities at Memorial Park include a municipal swimming pool, golf course, baseball fields, volleyball courts, a community library, and swings especially designed for infants. Several parks have walking, jogging, biking, and cross-country-skiing trails; others have skating, sledding hills, and skateboarding facilities. Many have picnic areas with barbeques too.

Once again, the author was contacted. Working with the New Prague’s Parks & Recreation Board and a city planner, URSI students researched the town’s park system and cataloged the various park locations. Narratives were prepared and photos assembled for the Applied Production students. SCC, in turn, did the layout, design and printing of an eight-page full color brochure. Another important part of the brochure was a pull-out map pinpointing park locations and a listing of amenities at each. Finally, URSI students coined the slogan--*New Prague: A Tradition of Progress in Parks & Recreation* which appeared on the brochure cover.

Communities, like businesses, pass through cycles: birth, growth, maturity, decline, and renewal. Even the most successful communities face the challenge of preserving what they already have. These were among the concerns that motivated the Economic Development

Authority of St. James, MN, to contact URSI & SCC. The city had once been a bustling rail center, but with the decline of railroads, the city passed through a new cycle. Promoting one existing and another new industrial park provided strong marketing inducements for the EDA. St. James is also the Watonwan County seat, had a satellite Mayo Clinic medical facility, a private airport, and its own lake and golf course. The renovated opera house, in-tact Victorian architecture, a nostalgic Main Street with a successful family bakery translated into strong pull factors for moving to or visiting the city. These were all key themes that the EDA wanted to promote in its brochure. One unexpected happening was a professional photographer contacting the author and giving permission to use his prints with no expectation of compensation other than acknowledgement of his work. To bring the brand to life, URSI students coined the slogan—*St. James: Endless Opportunity*.

The fifth joint service-learning project was finished in December of 2009, by URSI and SCC students for the city of St. Clair, MN. With a population of just under 700, this was the smallest community to request help. Among the things this brochure highlighted were education (the city has its own independent school district), recreation, housing, services, and churches, and a new state-of-the art water facility. When the city clerk came in to speak to the students about St. Clair, she said the city was particularly proud of their new logo (three trees against a sunburst background). Knowing the students' creativity in coining slogans for past brochures, she asked if it would be possible to link a slogan to the new logo. The slogan that the students coined was well-received--*Roots Rich in History, Living for Today, Branching out for Tomorrow*. Together the slogan and logo became the centerpiece of the brochure cover's picture collage. As with the prior four marketing projects, the local TV station and newspaper praised the students' community involvement.

### Differences and Similarities

While there is considerable difference in each of the city marketing projects, there is also continuity. Differences included the size of the communities involved. Town population fluctuated from Saint Peter (10,000), to Janesville (2,200), to NewPrague (6,000), to St. James (4,600) to St. Clair (700). The students enrolled in the URSI and SCC classes also fluctuated. For example, since the Saint Peter project was undertaken in the spring of 2003 and SCC's *Applied Graphic Production* class was scheduled in the fall, one upper-level student worked on this project as a special senior assignment with the assistance of the two graphics instructors. The enrollment on the URSI side was a total of seven undergraduate and graduate students. In subsequent years, community marketing service-learning projects were only scheduled in the fall and enrollment ranged from 7 to 35 students in each course. The projects also shifted from the ICMA city management focus to a more strategic community marketing focus.

Similarities included setup; for example, the brochures developed after 2003, contained a page dedicated to the community's profile. The latter contained demographic, historic, and

geographical information such as commuting distances from the specific city to major points,<sup>5</sup> of interest. A state map, pinpointing the town's location along with detailed city street maps, and special annual events<sup>6</sup> were also included along with student and faculty names, newspapers, television, and photo credits as well as the names of other important contributors. All projects had to be completed before the end of the 15-week semester and students were required to design a PowerPoint presentation for each entity they worked with, i.e., City Councils, a Park & Recreation Board, and an Economic Development Authority. The presentation explained the process students went through to develop the city's marketing plan. Not only have students put together impressive PowerPoint presentations on the process of developing the marketing plan, they also incorporated their knowledge of technology by ending their presentations with video streaming and unique musical sound tracks.<sup>7</sup>

### Media and Communication

The knowledge that URSI students acquire in media relations includes creating public service announcements and press releases for the print media, local radio and television stations. A key outcome is learning how to establish strong and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with the media. It became evident that students had succeeded, as the last four project presentations were video taped by KEYC TV and broadcast on their noon-day and evening news. Two feature articles were published by newspapers, and MSU's quarterly publications and online newsletters have printed excerpts about the projects. The author has also written several journal articles on these innovative service-learning projects. The MN Bureau of Tourism has also endorsed the projects by giving permission to use their *Explore Minnesota* logo in the brochures. Upon completion of each project, a 4' x 7' bulletin board outside the URSI office visually portrays the city's marketing story with photos, work samples, press releases, news media coverage, class pictures, etc. This visual communication stimulates interest in these service-learning projects for students, faculty, and administrators across disciplines.

Perhaps one of the strongest testaments for these projects is their nominal cost. It is no secret that small towns have limited budgets. Few, if any, could afford the cost of a professional PR firm doing a marketing study and subsequently producing a customized brochure. However, because of the unparalleled opportunity these university-community partnerships offer, students willingly seek enrollment in the URSI and SCC courses to acquire knowledge and skills while contributing to community partners. While faculty devotes more time to these studio courses than to a typical lecture course, they are also willing to put in additional time.

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<sup>5</sup> These distances included the MSP airport in the Twin Cities, the Mall-of-America, Mayo Clinic, and other metropolitan areas.

<sup>6</sup> In MN most small towns have adopted a theme around which they schedule an annual event. Some are focused around an agricultural theme, while others celebrate their ethnic heritage.

<sup>7</sup> The last presentation for the city of St. Clair, students used the song *I was born in a small town*.

Communities are asked to cover student mileage, supplies, paper, and printing plates. As one media source put it, "For a very nominal cost, towns are given a professional product that would cost much more, if done by an outside consultant."<sup>8</sup>

### Course Expectation, Feedback, and Evaluation

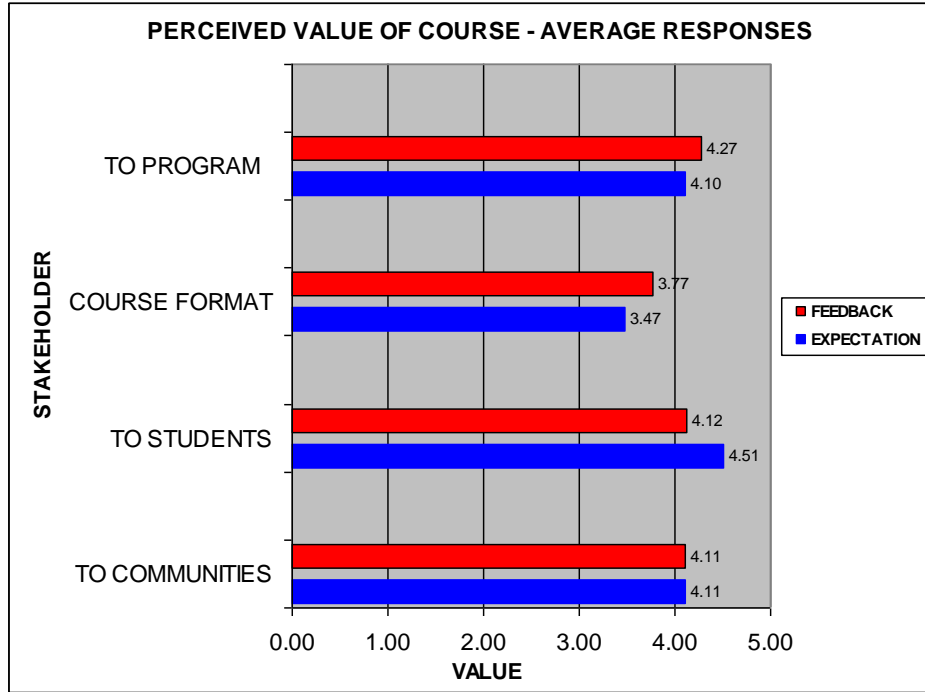
As part of the author's research, two surveys have been developed. The Course Expectation and the Course Feedback/Evaluation surveys are completed by students at the beginning and end of the course (see addendums A & B). These have revealed the following interesting information on the value of students being engaged in these types of projects.

The surveys were designed to allow students to express their course expectations at the beginning of the course and then, after the course was complete, share their feedback about the course in four specific areas: value to communities, value to students, value of the course format and value of the course to the program. As shown in graph 1, students had high expectations and participated in course experiences that exceeded their expectations in most areas. The "value to students" expectation (4.51 out of 5) in any category and may have been an unrealistic expectation. Students perceived enhanced value in this approach due to **actual** hands-on work experience in the field, but also the opportunity to interface in real time with working professionals in the field on significant, real, high visibility tasks. The combination of these factors, based on student feedback comment, suggests students perceive value based upon actual (versus canned task and outcomes) tasks completed with their working counterparts. This creates an atmosphere of not just learning, but also real time performance and networking of actual tasks and expectations alongside prospective employers. While a few students perceived, or hoped, that this experience would equate to an immediate job offer, most students understood, or valued, this experience as part of learning and networking.

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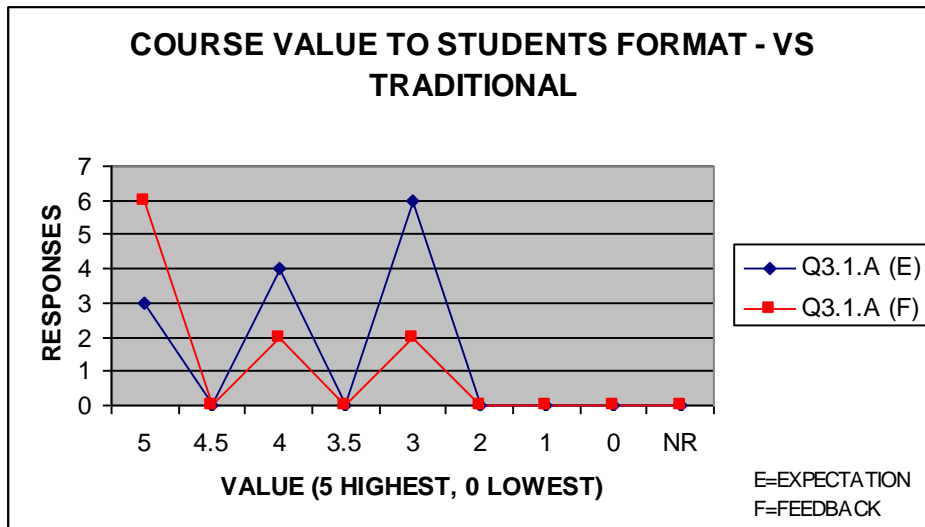
<sup>8</sup> Quote from KEYC TV newscast on December 1 and 2, 2009.





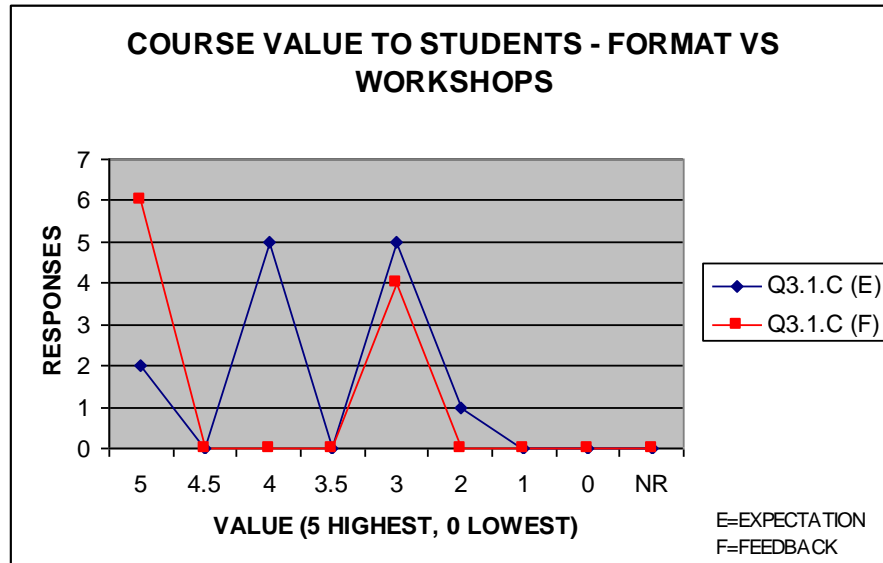
**Graph 1, perceived value of course to learning experience stakeholders**

Of particular interest were expectations and feedback concerning course format. As a service-learning project, this course was designed to not only take students out of the classroom but to also immerse them in authentic learning situations in communities that required strong problem solving, communication, teamwork and critical thinking skills.



**Graph 2, Course format as compared to traditional (lecture)**

This graph clearly shows the high level of student satisfaction from the course format which also provided learning through active participation in a service experience.



**Graph 3, Course format as compared to workshops**

The demonstrable outcome of this collaborative service-learning method far outweighed a workshop approach.

In comparison to unpaid, credit-bearing, structured internships (as part of the program requirement), the course value consistently met or exceeded the expectations that value was greater than that of internships. Feedback suggests that the “real-world” significant dimension of this course made the learning experience not only more real, but more timely.

## Conclusion

The value of moving students off campus and into the surrounding environs to collect community data through field trips and interviews, not only allows them an opportunity to interact meaningfully with different people, it also encourages them to assess their own relationship to the community. The power of immersing students in a community became evident from the classroom and the positive community response to the final product.

Community-university partnerships provide an effective means to encourage and support students and faculty who wish to engage in interdisciplinary research and meaningful service-learning. Silka (2001) believes that “Universities have an explicit role to play that draws on their

research function, but [also cautions that] they will need to learn about the community if such efforts are to have any hope of success.”

From a pedagogical standpoint, this cross-institutional service-learning project succeeded in “tak[ing] learning out of the traditional classroom and into the community to make it more significant and meaningful” (Author, 2001). Students learned how “to tell the story” of five small towns in Minnesota, through data collection, creative graphic design and effective media strategies (Author, 2008). Most importantly, students gained a greater awareness of their role in the community as agents of change through an applied service-learning experience. Simultaneously, a diverse team of graduate, undergraduate, and technical students from two institutions of higher learning had the unique opportunity to participate in a “learn-by-doing” service-learning project that was a “win-win” for all. Using the combined talents of students, faculty, community leaders and city staff, this is truly a service-learning partnership that will fuel further volunteerism and community synergy.

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