

Community Service Learning to Address Small Town Revitalization: University Participation in Main Street™ Programs

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At the interface of expert judgment and community participation stands “engagement,” the label currently embraced by colleges and universities to describe activities associated with serving the public interest. What had been viewed by higher education as service to, then extension of, and still later outreach from, is now considered engagement with. Today, faculty members, students and staff collaborate with residents as partners in enhancing community quality of life. The nature of this work makes engagement a complex undertaking, often taking place in contested, messy, and emotionally charged situations (Fear et. al. 2006, p.xi).

Community Service Learning with the Main Street™ Model

The application of faculty and student capital to address community needs is re-establishing itself as a framework for the public mission of higher education. Part of this “engagement” is the identification of problems within the local community, followed by studies of community problems and issues, which can be applied to community-based solutions and actions for renewal. Community Service Learning can represent an important structure for community revitalization, especially linking to existing programs and models for renewal. This case study will describe how the Main Street™ Model became a framework for long-term commitment of a University to community revitalization. Multiple faculty and classes were used over a seven year period to continually expand knowledge about the community and businesses, and using Main Street™ strategies for action research, planning and development to successfully create public and private investment and renewal in a declining historic downtown. The critical question, “How to revitalize historic downtown Cheney, Washington?” was addressed through the work of EWU planning, business, marketing, communication, MIS faculty, classes and students in partnership with a nonprofit community-based organization and the City of Cheney.

EWU is a regional comprehensive university based in a small town 20 miles from a regional urban center. Although only four blocks from campus, the historic downtown area of Cheney has suffered years of decline and out-migration of businesses to the edge of town in suburban-style malls, leaving the small historic downtown to decline. The University includes an urban planning program, and the author worked with City and University officials, business leaders, and citizens to address this problem. The nonprofit community-based organization, Pathways to Progress, was actually formed specifically to implement the Main Street™ Model, and all partners joined in efforts to revitalize the historic downtown, including renewing the link between downtown and the campus. Through this effort Eastern Washington University moved beyond its traditional role as

academic institution into an “engaged university,” bringing real community problems not just to one class, but to coordinated class and development partnerships to address problems over an initial three-year period, now in the eighth year of operation.

Main Street and the Main Street™ Program

Main Street (USA) became a focal point for civic life and civility in small towns across America starting with the early settlement of rural areas, and peaking at the end of the 19th Century and early 20th Century. The unique combination of historic building design, social memory, and small town values permeate American culture and society from the literature of Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis and William Faulkner, to the icons and imagery of Walt Disney in Main Street USA at Disneyland and Disney World. Geographer Richard Francaviglia (1996) has most clearly assessed the role of American small towns through his detailed analysis of architectural style, space, and idealized image. From the recognition of small town Main Streets as valued cultural resources, planners, geographers, and historians have sought to revitalize and to recreate sustainable business and community centers (Davies 1998; Dewees, Lobao and Swanson 2003; Gates 2000; Green et.al. 2002). The decline of downtown is a significant problem within many communities, and also a problem in relation to institutions of higher education within those communities. The revitalization of historic downtowns is an exemplary initiative for community service learning.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has created a unique and very successful program for the revitalization of historic downtowns in small towns across the United States called the Main Street™ Model. The National Main Street Center and 40 state coordinating programs provide training and technical assistance to establish local nonprofit revitalization organizations that actually carry out the program, and it is within these local Main Street organizations that service learning can play a significant role. This program is an excellent vehicle for Community Service Learning for two reasons. First, as a model, it offers concrete structures and an action framework, as well as formats and examples of research projects including marketing studies, community profiles, business plans, and a wide range of activities. Secondly, higher education institutions can establish relationships with existing Main Street™ Programs (which may be urban neighborhood business center programs as well as small towns) or in the example here, use the models to create a Main Street™ organization fully staffed and operated by Community Service Learning students and faculty engaged in work with the board and committees.

The Main Street™ Program was created by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as part of early (1960s) efforts to preserve historic buildings, which found that the most effective strategy was one that did not focus exclusively on individual buildings, but recognized the context of historic downtowns. The program is now carried out through the Main Street Center (Main Street Center 2006) to support local historic downtown renewal and revitalization of pedestrian-oriented business districts. More than 1,500 organizations across the nation in 2004 used the Main Street™ Model as a guide for

revitalizing their historic downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts (National Main Center 2006) and the program is firmly established as a success.

Surprisingly, the Main Street™ Program does not offer significant funding for projects or renovation, but established the national Main Street Center and state supporting organizations to offer training, resources, and technical assistance. The program is carried out through the creation of local, community-based nonprofit organizations which mobilize local business and community contributions through a very structured program. Local programs which meet these guidelines are recognized at the state and national level as Main Street™ communities.

The 2001 National Reinvestment Statistics identified a total of \$16.5 billion in public and private reinvestment, an average of almost \$10 million per Main Street Community over an average of 7.4 years per program (Main Street Center 2006). The local Main Street organizations have generated 226,900 new jobs, and renovated 88,700 buildings since 1980. For every \$1 spent on the Main Street™ Program, \$40 has been reinvested. This is a very successful approach to the problem of downtown revitalization.

The Main Street Center is established to support local programs and offers general program resources (Foreman and Mooney 1996, 1999; Kemp 2000; Lifkind 1997; Loescher and Lynch 1996; Schruver 1977; Smith 1996); descriptions of Main Street Success Stories; a *Main Street Approach Presentation* (slide show); a bookstore (Main Street Bookstore) and a monthly Journal, the *Main Street News*. Many states have also developed manuals and guides for Main Street™ Programs in their state (Cook and Bentley, 1986). The National Agricultural Library has joined this effort through the Rural Information Center (RIC) website, “RIC’s Rural Downtown Revitalization FAQ’s,” which greatly expands the depth and richness of available resources in the form of on-line access to local reports, research guidelines, and handbooks for small town revitalization. This is an encyclopedic guidebook and significant resource for anyone engaged in rural and small town revitalization and planning. Universities can easily contact their local Main Street™ Program, or work with local organizations in small towns or urban neighborhoods to create a Main Street™ Program, or help lead such efforts through these available resources. All of these models and specific project resources can provide excellent problem-based learning frameworks for classes in any location.

Solving the Cheney Revitalization Problem

A mayor’s Blue Ribbon Committee for change in downtown Cheney, a new University President, and planning faculty knowledgeable about the Main Street™ Program enabled a long-term commitment to community renewal. Initially EWU support for the Main Street™ Program was established through a Memorandum of Understanding between Pathways and the University to provide volunteer faculty and student assistance without cost for a three year period. This identified the problem: the revitalization of downtown Cheney. Within six months two grants were received by EWU to support this effort. One grant from the State of Washington was to use EWU Work Study student

interns to staff an office in the historic downtown. The grant funded one graduate planning student to coordinate all student and class activities, and five additional students from business, geography, planning, communications, or related disciplines, to each work 10-20 hours per week to carry out and support the activities of the committees and the Board. A second grant was funded through the Corporation for National and Community Service "Learn and Serve America" Program to fund a 3/4 time professional coordinator to supervise students, classes, and all program activities. Planning and business classes, along with classes from other disciplines, were organized through the University's Community Service Learning program to provide faculty directed student research for marketing, promotion, planning and business development studies.

The Pathways to Progress staff of six interns, a part-time faculty associate as coordinator, and a faculty "principal investigator" provided support for the organization and its four committees listed under the Main Street structure. This goes against the Main Street™ requirement for a full-time director, but enabled the program to be successful using CSL students and interns. Other institutions may have the advantage to link with existing Main Street programs and support those program activities. The four committees under which all activities of the Board are directed, are described below.

Organization

The first step in the Main Street™ Program was to create a nonprofit, community-based organization recognized by the State as a 501 c-3 nonprofit organization supported by a Business Law faculty member. A local businessman donated the use of a downtown storefront office, and by December, 1998, Pathways to Progress, which had been an interesting idea in August, held an open house in its new office, and presented the products from two planning classes and a charrette exercise as the "draft" Master Plan for downtown revitalization.

The Washington State Main Street Coordinating Program also provided support for start-up of the Pathways to Progress organizational development. The Director, Susan Kemp, conducted a workshop on the organization of Main Street™ Programs and an initial goal setting exercise to guide Pathways activities. This goal setting workshop, held in September, 2000, became part of an annual retreat in which Pathways board members, committee members, and key participants in the program. Each subsequent year the Board has assessed accomplishments and developed a strategic plan that set priorities and work programs to guide students, faculty, staff, classes, and committee/board activities for the coming year.

The key organizational framework for the Pathways Main Street™ Program was the organization of activities around standing committees: the Organization Committee; the Events and Promotion Committee; the Design and Planning Committee; and the Economic Restructuring Committee. All Committees meet monthly, and make monthly reports to the board. All student, faculty and staff efforts are linked to committee activities, and all class projects, programs, and activities are carried out under the direction of and report to committees and the board to implement the annual strategic

plan. The Organization Committee addresses on-going issues including fund raising, reporting and strategic planning, coordination of business and program activities, and making sure the organization is able to identify and take appropriate actions to revitalize historic downtown Cheney.

Events and Promotion

The Events and Promotion Committee is responsible for development of promotional materials, special activities, and events which encourage people to shop in downtown and use downtown businesses on a regular basis. Part of the Promotional activities included marketing and communications faculty and classes which developed brochures, logos, press release formats, and special activities and events for Pathways. These included fund raising initiatives, and events including Cheney Earth Day, Cheney Festival of Games and Rodeo, Cheney/EWU Homecoming, and Cheney Valentine's Day promotional activities. Classes in computer science developed a Pathways website (Pathways to Progress), and worked with business and planning classes to create an on-line business directory which identified each business, with photo, address, contact information, and links to business websites. Over 60 businesses are listed in the directory, which is hosted on the EWU website, with links to all Pathways Partners, including EWU, the local Cheney school district, the City of Cheney, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Chamber of Commerce. One student is assigned to provide web support for the Pathways website and on-going web development.

Design (and Planning)

The Main StreetTM Model, building on its historic preservation roots, identifies design as a critical component, which originally focused on the identification of significant historic buildings, and their preservation. Using planning faculty and students, Pathways has expanded this design. Survey data for businesses, location maps, and physical field inventories produced extensive and detailed data used to generate alternative actions reviewed by citizens and approved in a Revitalization Plan. The selected alternatives reflect consensus agreement on actions and plans. Subsequent planning charrette exercises have led to community engagement in decision-making, and approval of plans has supported successful applications for grants for street improvements and public investments, while stimulating private investment in new development (the Brewster Project) and storefront improvements. These class projects and related Main StreetTM planning initiatives demonstrate critical community problem-solving through the Main Street Program.

Economic Restructuring

Ultimately, the success of the Main StreetTM Program will depend on the success of local businesses, both through the successful retention and expansion of existing businesses, and the recruitment of new businesses. A major committee and work area for the Main StreetTM Model is analysis of the local economy, and efforts to support and

stimulate private investment and development. The Economic Restructuring Committee for Pathways includes Pathways Board members; key economic development and planning staff from the City; business, planning, and economics faculty; and active business owners. Research on existing businesses, property ownership and real estate, and business finance has supported development of recruitment and retention strategies. The committee has also sought to guide and promote public investment and incentives that support private investment. A detailed property inventory is updated regularly by students and represented in GIS maps which provides immediate information on land status, and has been used to identify and promote business expansion and new business potential in the community. Such active linkages and engagement of action with local businesses represent critical “interventions” in the private sector which have distinguished local nonprofit development organizations like Pathways from government program, and have produced positive impacts in economic revitalization (Deweese, Lobao, and Swanson 2003; Green, et.al., 2002).

The Planning Classes, Planning Charrettes and Community Problem-Solving

An initial planning charrette exercise, a quick study using the planning process (Sanhoff 2000) in fall, 1999, involved 40 students and 20 citizens, who learned about the Main Street program, assessed land use conditions and opportunities for improvement within the district, and created alternatives for action. Participants went into the field to map land use and conditions in a 10 block area, working in seven groups. Each group worked independently to tour the area, to map critical problems and issues, and to create at least five alternative concepts for improvements within the district based on their assessment. These “concepts for revitalization” alternatives from each group were presented back to the whole class at the end of the day. The results of this one-day “brainstorming” charrette exercise was further refined by planning students during the remainder of the quarter to cover a sixteen block area of the historic downtown. Sketches and drawings were made by students to illustrate alternative concepts, along with maps of plan alternatives for the proposed plan.

A second forum and open house was held in January, with over 50 citizens attending, in which citizens were invited to review the wide range of alternatives, and “vote” for the ones they identified as most desirable. This “rating” of alternatives, along with further citizen review and comments led to consensus agreement for improvements to First Street to support businesses, and landscaping along College Street to link the University to the center of the historic downtown with a landscaped pedestrian street. This became Phase I of the Plan, while Phase II and III were established for expanded landscaping to the downtown district, street and sidewalk improvements, and funding for business reinvestment in storefront improvements including signage.

This plan for the downtown area was formalized by the Pathways Project Student Intern and local planners, and adopted as a sub-area plan to the Comprehensive Plan by the City of Cheney in summer, 2000. At the same time, a grant for federal funding for the Phase I improvements was submitted to the State Department of Transportation.

Because the improvements were part of an approved city plan, the grant was approved, leading to over \$1 million in public investment, including \$100,000 raised by local citizen and business contributions as project matching funds.

A second charrette process was initiated to address the closure of a large auto dealership located in the downtown. Although the auto dealer's move from downtown Cheney to outside the city limits resulted in detrimental losses of tax revenue for the City, the action represented removal of an inappropriate downtown land use, and opened the door for revitalization. A charrette by local business owners and developers identified possible redevelopment for property located at Second Street and College. Three community service learning class presentations on plans, market demand, and business potential formed the basis of the charrette, and several developers participated and were very interested in the project. One was able to identify the possibility of commercial development on the ground floor with residential uses above the commercial space, typical of many historic downtown developments. A 141 unit apartment complex with ground floor commercial development (restaurants, coffee shops, retail stores) was proposed in partnership with the University, which agreed to lease the apartments for twenty years to serve a newly growing residential population.

As a result of EWU policies, the "commuter college" reality EWU's past had already transformed itself into an institution with all dorm rooms occupied (two years earlier there had been less than 60% occupancy in dorms on campus). This new project in the downtown addressed critical student housing shortages and re-established the link between the campus and the historic downtown. The innovative lease agreement supported developer financing for the project, while bringing a new resident population, new businesses, and significant linkages between the historic downtown and the EWU campus to Cheney's Main Street. Both the dorm construction and street improvements were completed in fall, 2002, and made major changes in the vitality and spirit of the historic downtown and the entire community. Immediate plans were made by Pathways to Progress to implement Phase II and III of the plan which called for expanded public investment in streetscapes, pedestrian and landscape facilities, and support for renewed private investment in storefront improvements and business development.

The initial success with completion of Phase I improvements only made more apparent the run-down physical conditions of the buildings along First and Second Streets in the downtown. When the street improvement and landscaping project was completed in spring, 2002, there were no stores in the historic downtown which had appropriate or attractive storefronts and signage, and, in fact, few stores which had signs at all. As the community and EWU students began to shop and use the historic downtown, improvements to storefronts were identified as a critical issue. Using the focus on planning processes and the Main Street organizational framework, Pathways identified the need for a third charrette exercise, this one to focus on storefront improvements. Over 19 downtown merchants participated in two half-day workshops in which they evaluated existing buildings and set guidelines for the downtown as part of an urban design class. It was critical that appropriate guidelines that recognize the historic appearance of downtown and wishes of businesses as established in "Draft Guidelines,"

be used to promote appropriate improvements. While not funding full historic building restoration, these storefront guidelines and funding for improvements were developed to address a critical problems in the appearance and image of our downtown building on historic storefront style and design.

These Pathways successes were carried out by EWU planning faculty, students and staff, along with faculty and students from other disciplines in partnership with citizens through Pathways to Progress using the Main Street Program. Within the first three years, Pathways to Progress had generated more than \$7 million in investments in the historic downtown, and dramatically improved the outlook for business to build positive relationships with students. Despite the construction of another new shopping center at the edge of town, along with several fast food outlets, the historic downtown also began to grow and thrive with increased activity and use.

Lessons learned from this project were that students could make significant contributions to understand and address community problems using the Main Street Model and working in partnership with city, university and community resources. The Pathways to Progress organization relied on students with somewhat limited faculty support for staff, but business, community and university leaders assumed important decision-making roles on committees and the Board to guide the successful effort. Most students, especially the graduate coordinator, had little or no experience, nor any awareness of how community problems are solved. The use of interactive “team” management processes to support a community-based organization required constant adjustment and adaptation to multiple, very complex problems. The frameworks and models utilized, however, enabled students in a number of classes not only to contribute, but to understand the general organization and outcomes, and become effective in community problem solving with the community.

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