Connecting college learners with rural entrepreneurship opportunities: The rural entrepreneurship teaching unit

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ABSTRACT

The Rural Entrepreneurship Teaching Unit (RETU) is designed to acquaint university retailing and hospitality majors with rural entrepreneurship opportunities. The unit is an outcome of a federal grant focused on the contribution of the local retail sector to rural community resilience. The RETU integrates knowledge regarding rural development, market analysis, entrepreneurship, and marketing in an interactive outreach project. The RETU, which includes three modules, focuses on introducing Millennial learners to rural issues. It pairs student teams with rural community entrepreneurs and business leaders to apply business and community resiliency concepts to local business sector issues. Learning teams then use results of a focused research activity to develop competitive strategies to enhance the local business sector in the community. The unit was piloted at two Midwestern universities during the spring 2011 semester. Learners (n=40) strongly agreed that participation increased understanding of issues facing rural entrepreneurs and appreciation for positive and negative aspects of owning a small business in a rural community. Community participants (n=10) expressed satisfaction with new-found knowledge about Millennials' lifestyle and shopping preferences, ideas from students' business enhancement projects, and the opportunity to contribute to learners' educational goals.

Keywords: rural entrepreneurship, university-community partnerships, service-learning, Millennials

INTRODUCTION

Many rural communities are struggling to maintain economic and social vitality in the face of massive economic and demographic changes. Some communities have focused efforts on creating and growing entrepreneurs to revitalize sagging economies. One way university retailing and hospitality (e.g., restaurant, hotel and tourism) programs can contribute to rural economic development efforts is to introduce students to entrepreneurial opportunities in rural and small towns. Rural issues are often 'off the grid' in university curricula (Carr & Kefalas, 2009), especially relating to career opportunities. Employment for college graduates tends to be clustered in urban and suburban areas (Desmet & Fafchamps, 2005; Weitz & Whitfield, 2010). Considering these trends, it's logical to assume that faculty and students would tend to focus on preparing for and seeking career opportunities in metropolitan areas. Presenting information on opportunities in rural areas can give students a more diverse perspective on career and lifestyle options after graduation.

This paper describes the Rural Entrepreneurship Teaching Unit (RETU), consisting of three modules, which was piloted in two universities to introduce retailing and hospitality students to entrepreneurship and career opportunities in rural communities. The modules include outreach activities that are designed to be completed as a university-community partnership, and were developed as a result of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) sponsored research focused on discovering factors that impact a rural community's ability to rebound from economic and social shocks of the last several decades (Niehm, Frazier, Stoel & Anderson, 2008). The modules integrate knowledge regarding trends and issues in rural America with market analysis, entrepreneurship, retailing, marketing, and merchandising concepts in an interactive, semester long service-learning activity. The learning activities offer students the opportunity to develop business and market research, critical thinking and analysis skills by collecting and analyzing economic and social data about a rural community, and then organizing and presenting information in a comprehensive community analysis. Learning teams use results of their research to develop strategies to enhance the local retail sector in the community. The project aims to expand learners' awareness of career and lifestyle options in rural communities, and to build appreciation of challenges and opportunities for entrepreneurship in rural areas.

BACKGROUND

Millennials, who comprise the majority of college students in today's college classrooms, are expected to become the most entrepreneurial generation ever ("Intuit Future of Small Business Report", 2010; Kauffman Foundation, 2009). Many Millennials view traditional corporate jobs as constraining and risky, and their tremendous self-confidence and adaptability makes this generation suited for entrepreneurial activity. A primary objective of the RETU is to expose students to entrepreneurial opportunities in rural communities. A recent study indicates a rising interest in entrepreneurship among first year college students, likely driven in part by outsourcing and employment uncertainty (Kauffman Foundation, 2009). The Kauffman study notes that college graduates interested in entrepreneurial careers may delay launching a business until after they have accumulated a number of years of work experience. According to the Kauffman Foundation report (2009) actual launching of a business most commonly occurs ten years after leaving college.

An important component of a college education is exposing students to the myriad of career options where their knowledge and skills may be applied so that they have information to help them in career decision making. Personal experience and exposure to various career options can build self efficacy, and assist students in making career choices (Feldman & Whitfield, 2008). Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) proposes that an individual's self efficacy beliefs related to a career help determine career outcome expectations; self-efficacy and outcome expectations are determinants of career interest; and interests, self-efficacy and outcome expectations help to clarify career choice (Lent et al., 2008). The RETU follows the SCCT model, which suggests that self efficacy related to a particular career is enhanced through opportunities to develop expertise and/or ability related to the career. The unit allows learners to develop expertise and build self efficacy through research assignments, entrepreneur and community leader interviews, and business consulting and business plan projects. SCCT proposes that enhanced self efficacy can lead to an individual's desire for continued involvement in career related activities, and results in realistic expectations of the outcomes of pursuing the career. Enhanced self efficacy and clear outcome expectations may influence an individual's interest in pursuing the career (Schaffner & Jepsen, 1999).

The unit employs an experiential approach to introduce rural entrepreneurship as a career option. Experiential approaches, which employ transformational learning activities to create knowledge, have a greater impact on the decision to pursue an entrepreneurial career than more traditional lecture methods (Sherman, Sebora & Digman, 2008). The unit uses observation, networking and dialogue with entrepreneurs, and hands-on, interactive projects in a real-time environment to introduce learners to entrepreneurial concepts and realities of entrepreneurial careers. Creating knowledge through experiential learning may be effective in enhancing learner self efficacy, leading to clarity in career outcome expectations, and for some learners, an interest in pursuing a career in entrepreneurship and/or rural lifestyle (Sherman, Sebora & Digman, 2008).

The RETU also introduces students to aspects of rural community life and lifestyles. Although many new college graduates are attracted to urban life for personal and career reasons, rural living often becomes more attractive as young adults gain work experience and begin to consider quality of life issues (Artz, 2003). Many rural communities are promoting quality education and medical services, and emphasizing social and family-friendly features of their communities in order to attract younger residents (Johnson, 2008). This unit enables students to gain firsthand knowledge of various aspects of rural living, providing information for future lifestyle decisions. The RETU also provides students with a perspective on rural issues and trends that they may not be exposed to in other courses.

Rural entrepreneurial opportunities and the brain drain problem

The outmigration of college-educated young residents to urban areas is a pervasive issue for many rural U.S. communities (Dabson, 2001; Drabenstott, 2010). Research indicates that college-educated residents in the U.S. are more likely than high school graduates to leave their home state of residence (Kodrzycki, 2001). This loss of college-educated residents to other regions or states characterizes "brain drain." Brain drain may in fact have an additive negative effect beyond that of population decline as higher education tends to yield entrepreneurs who create and diffuse innovations (Mathur, 1999) and other skilled workers who make and use technology (Yu & Artz, 2009; Hansen, Ban & Huggins, 2003). Thus, a declining population,

specifically the loss of educated residents, can have a devastating impact on economic development in terms of community leadership, entrepreneurship, human capital, income, and tax revenue (Mathur, 1999; Ionescu & Polgreen, 2009; Stricker, 2007). The increased movement of younger people out of rural areas and an otherwise aging population have further fed the brain drain of human capital and resulting economic challenges for rural communities (Dabson, 2001; Drabenstott, 2010).

  Rural communities are also frequently disadvantaged in terms of their remote geographic location and access to resources of all types, including business assistance, technology and transportation infrastructure (Dabson, 2001; Ricks & Pettypool, 2008; Sharp, Agnitsch, Ryan & Flora, 2002). These factors in turn add difficulty in attracting new businesses and skilled workers to rural communities (Dabson, 2001; Drabenstott, 2006; Hassebrook, 2003; Small Business Administration, 2006). Because rural regions have been hit hardest by brain drain, it is a major concern for the policy makers of rural America (Artz, 2003; Yu & Artz, 2009; Gibbs, 2006; Mills & Hazarika, 2001). For example, the state of Iowa has been particularly hard hit by brain drain ("Iowa Brain Drain," 2007). It loses more young, single, college-educated adults than any other state except North Dakota. This brain drain, combined with a surge in baby boom retirements, has Iowa employers and government planners concerned that a labor shortage will occur between 2015 and 2025 ("Iowa Brain Drain," 2007). Likewise, Michigan, which does a good job in producing college graduates, has a difficult time keeping them in the state. Recently, Michigan adopted an 'economic gardening' approach to retain college educated Michigan residents by encouraging new business start ups in the state ("Propelling a New Economic Direction", 2010).

  To sustain growth and vitality, rural regions may want to promote their communities as places where people want to live and work and more effectively promote their state and its opportunities to would-be entrepreneurs ("Big Ideas for Iowa", 2009). Entrepreneurial careers appeal to many younger individuals. Over 5 million Americans under age 34 are pursuing entrepreneurial ventures. The prospect of being one's own boss, financial rewards and quality of life issues are driving an increase in entrepreneurial intentions, especially among 18-34 year olds (Keifer, 2004). As corporate employment opportunities become less certain in the current economic environment, younger people may view the need for self-employment with greater intensity ("Entrepreneurship Everywhere," 2007).

  Research shows that brain drain does not only have an economic impact, but also an impact on leadership, for rural communities. Young, educated people are tending to move to cities, while those without a college degree are moving to or remaining in rural areas (Artz, 2003; "Iowa brain drain", 2006). In Ohio, all rural counties have experienced population loss during the past decade, attributed to the balance between number of graduates produced by universities and number of jobs available for those graduates in their field of study (McGuire, Johnston & Saevig, 2006). Nebraska and South Dakota have also experienced similar outmigration of young residents. Similarly, Iowa experienced the second highest brain drain rate of young, college-educated adults in the nation ("Iowa brain drain," 2006). These young, educated people are future leaders of rural communities; communities that fail to attract such individuals will suffer from a shortage of individuals who possess needed skills.

  Many rural communities view the ability to attract and retain young, talented, college-educated families as a potential way to build economic vitality and resiliency (McGranahan & Wojan, 2007). Entrepreneurship is increasingly viewed as an economic development strategy in rural communities (Drabenstott, Novack & Abraham, 2003). Embracing entrepreneurship may be one way that rural areas can attract young, college educated workers. Younger individuals may

be attracted to rural communities by entrepreneurial opportunities, a safe living environment, and natural/recreational amenities that offer the quality of life they seek (McGranahan & Wojan, 2007). The present study addresses the brain drain challenge by presenting an educational model aimed at enhancing the awareness of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in rural communities for retailing and hospitality students. The model also provides a means for strategy development and the implementation of tools and knowledge to promote rural community and business resiliency.

Building community/university partnerships

In the university setting, service learning and outreach projects, as well as community partnerships, fall under the broader concept of engagement. Engagement and outreach activities have become increasingly important to universities who are challenged to demonstrate relevance of their teaching and research to stakeholders (Coldstream, 2003; Watson, 2003). Engagement, therefore, provides the context in which community partnerships and research opportunities can flourish. Successful university-community partnerships can provide a number of benefits including: enhanced experiential learning and career/employment enhancement for students, better informed practice for business owners and community others, and access to information and research funding for academicians (Davies, 1996; Landry & Amara, 1998; Kellet & Goldstein, 1999; Mead et al., 1999; Amabile, Patterson & Wojcik, 2001; Hollis, 2001).

Various authors have attempted to define and examine university-community partnerships, yielding a variety of perspectives including: linkage complexity (Barnett, Hall, Berg & Camerena, 1999), learning theory (Callahan & Martin, 2006), goal setting (Clark, 1999), network embeddedness (Kisjer, 2007), and participatory action (Fliker, Savan, McGrath, Kolena & Middenberger, 2007; Williams et al., 2008). While there is some variation across these perspectives, the concepts of shared responsibility, shared interest, and a focus on the common good prevail. Hogner and Kentworth (2010) state that these basic tenets apply to university-community partnerships regardless of the reason for their formation.

Shinnar and Young (2003) noted that a growing number of colleges and universities have incorporated a service-learning component to enhance student learning, promote citizenship, and offer real-world learning experiences. "Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" ("Learn and Serve," n. d.). This holds true for retail-related service–learning projects (O'Halloran & O'Halloran, 1999; Tucker, McCarthy, Hoxmeier, & Lenk, 1998), including projects aimed at the enhancement of rural retail businesses (Muske, Jin, & Yu, 2004). More recent research (Hogner & Kenworthy, 2010) suggests that service-learning is a highly effective pedagogical technique as it combines concepts of experiential learning (hands-on applications) and active learning (focused on citizenship and relevant community needs and interests) in the community setting. These authors (Hogner & Kenworthy, 2010, p. 254-255) provide a set of principles that facilitated development of the RETU and student service-learning experience. The principles were adapted for this project to include:

- Institutionally Grounded: Service-learning projects were integrated into institutional learning objectives and course assignments.

- Reciprocally Based: Project drew on both community and business needs and interests and integrated all stakeholders in project planning, implementation, and assessment.
- External to Classroom: Service-learning experiences took place outside of the classroom to provide a deeper appreciation of rural communities and their economic, cultural, social and political issues.
- Community Interest Focused: Service-learning experiences were aimed at advancing community well-being.
- Aimed at Enhancing Democracy: Service-learning experiences provided opportunity to deepen student understanding of community social discourse and the responsibilities of community membership.
- Designed as a Learning-based Experiential Enterprise: Service-learning reinforced course learning objectives through incorporation of a shared, reflective component.

The RETU is hinged on a service-learning approach that combines hands-on application of knowledge and service to rural communities and businesses (Ash, 2003; Kolb, 1984; Shinnar & Young, 2003). The RETU can enhance student learning through the application of entrepreneurial concepts and competencies in a real world setting, which requires critical thinking and creativity to meet community and business needs and address the perspectives of multiple constituents. Research suggests that students can be effective in assisting rural communities through service-learning projects (Fannin & LeBlanc, 2007). Other research (Papamarcos, 2005) supports the effectiveness of experiential learning for business management students particularly when used along with active university-community partnerships. Kenworthy –U'Ren (2008) also profiled the positive impact of service and experiential learning in teaching business ethics within a management education context.

Successful service-learning programs require the identification of appropriate clients and co-operative community partnerships (Fannin & LeBlanc, 2007). Sargent and Ward's (2004) framework for academic collaboration was followed to develop university-community partnerships for this project. Phase 1-Initiation focused on motivating participants to be involved in the Rural Entrepreneurship outreach and service-learning project. In this project small, rural communities of 10,000 or fewer residents with a desire to enhance their community and business resiliency were identified for participation. Phase 2-Clarification involved meeting with community leaders to clarify the purpose, scope, and duration of the project and identify appropriate business clients for student service-learning team projects. Phase 3-Implementation focused on identifying roles and responsibilities of university faculty, students, and community members for the project. Finally, Phase 4-Completion engaged collaborating community members (business owners and community leaders) and student team members in evaluating project activities by asking them to provide quantitative ratings and qualitative comments regarding the project outcomes.

Engaging Millennials in learning activities

The RETU was designed to appeal to contemporary college students' learning preferences. The millennial generation or 'Generation Y' represents the largest proportion of students in today's college classrooms. This generation has been described as sociable, goal oriented and volunteer-minded (Brown, 2004; Martin & Tulgan, 2006). Millennials are attracted to work that is meaningful, and search for balance between work, family and leisure. This

generation believes that they can make a difference in the world (Allen, 2004). They prefer to learn and work in an environment that has task variety, is flexible, intellectually challenging, and provides immediate feedback (Hurst & Good, 2009).

The RETU uses constructivist instructional strategies that appeal to Millennials' expectations for a learning environment that includes hands on activities, social interaction and multiple resources (Carter, 2008). Constructivism views learners as responsible, active agents in their knowledge acquisition process (Loyens, Rikers & Schmidt, 2007) and focuses on how learners create meaning (Loyens, Rikers & Schmidt, 2008). An important goal of constructivist learning environments is to engage students in deep, meaningful, problem-based learning (Rikers, van Gog & Pas, 2008). Problem-based learning starts by using learners' prior knowledge as a framework for interpreting new information. Cooperative strategies, self-regulated learning and use of meaningful, authentic problems on learners' prior knowledge are employed to construct new knowledge. The RETU immerses students in problem based, experiential learning activities where student teams collect and analyze economic and social data for a community, and use the information to develop retail-based strategies leading to community economic development. Learners work in teams and collaborate with community leaders and business owners to synthesize knowledge and solve real world problems. This approach embodies the constructivist learning idea that social interaction and negotiation can help learners in their knowledge acquisition. Constructivist learning also incorporates self-regulated learning, including goal-setting, self-assessment and meta-cognitive aspects. The unit offers the opportunity to solve complex, meaningful problems that are similar to real-life situations, promotes transfer of knowledge, and appeals to Millennials' desire to make a difference (Loyens, Rikers & Schmidt, 2008; Howe & Strauss, 2000).

RETU OVERVIEW

The RETU is designed to be incorporated into an upper level undergraduate entrepreneurship, small business management or retailing course. The unit can be embedded in existing course content, and completed over the course of a semester or quarter. The unit is designed to be completed in partnership with a rural or small community where community development and business leaders, plus a number of local retail and hospitality business owners are willing to interact with students in the course of the project. The instructor leads student teams in a series of learning activities to identify characteristics of strong rural communities, and then to develop competitive strategies which have the potential to strengthen the local retail and service sector. Learners use a research guide based on business and community resilience concepts to compile a profile of economic, infrastructure and quality of life aspects of the community, and work with community partners to develop strategies to energize the local retail and service sector in the community.

The RETU consists of three modules. Module one presents an overview of trends and issues affecting the rural marketplace and opportunities for rural entrepreneurship, with emphasis on retail and service businesses. Module two guides learners in conducting a systematic community assessment based on community resilience research. Module three prepares learners to present the results of their research in written and oral form. A course business plan or consulting project can be included as a culminating activity. Each module is described briefly in the next section, with a more detailed overview for each module presented in the Appendix.

Module one, 'Rural Entrepreneurship: Context, Trends and Issues' presents an overview of trends and issues affecting the rural marketplace and opportunities for rural entrepreneurship, with emphasis on retail and hospitality businesses. The purpose of this module is to introduce learners to opportunities and challenges of starting and owning a small business in a rural area. Learning objectives for this module include increasing learners' understanding of current issues facing rural communities and retail and hospitality businesses operating in these communities. The module includes a review of USDA and other definitions of rural, and a discussion of major changes occurring in rural American communities, such as economic, population and social change. The module also introduces the concept of 'community resilience' which refers to a community's ability to rebound in the face of economic and social changes. The module is designed to be completed in one or two class sessions, and includes a PowerPoint presentation, instructor resources, bibliography, and assessment tools.

The second module in the series, 'Conducting a Community Analysis', introduces learners to the procedures and considerations involved in planning for, collecting, analyzing and using market and community information to develop competitive business strategies. The activity presented in this module is designed to be completed in student teams of four to six members. This module emphasizes the importance of systematic analysis of the market as a foundation for planning new businesses and strengthening existing businesses. An overview of primary and secondary research sources is included, along with an explanation of processes and considerations in the collection and interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data. A comprehensive community analysis diagnostic tool was developed for use in this module by the authors based on research findings from a USDA sponsored research project. The diagnostic tool is based on the concept of community resilience, and leads learners in the development of a socio-economic community profile, as well as an inventory of the programs and services available to businesses, existing infrastructure, a history of the community, and information on the community's quality of life and resilient characteristics. After completing this module, learners should be able to locate, evaluate and interpret primary and secondary sources of information to develop an analysis of the community.

The results of the community analysis may be used to develop a business feasibility analysis, a new business proposal, or a plan to enhance an existing business. Presentation of module concepts can be completed in one class session. Student teams may be given two to four weeks to compile the data required for the completion of this module. Instructor resources, including Power Point file, assessment tools, and the Community Analysis Diagnostic Tool are included in the module.

The goal of module three 'Presenting Community Analysis Research', is to apply business writing and presentation concepts to the presentation of information collected by student teams in module two. The module addresses writing style, tone, organization, presenting and writing about data, citing work, appendix development and collaborative writing. Learning goals for this module include understanding of basic principles of business report writing, and demonstrating the ability to plan and prepare a well organized, clearly written business report. This module provides learners with information and skills necessary to produce a high quality community analysis report and presentation for dissemination to community partners. The skills developed in planning and preparing the community analysis report can be applied to business writing in a wide variety of contexts. The module includes instructor resources, Power Point files, report format guide and rubrics.

Piloting the RETU

The RETU was piloted by two universities in entrepreneurship courses during spring semester 2011. Twenty two students participated in the project at University A; 20 students participated at University B. University A partnered with a traditional agriculturally-oriented rural community (population 1,951) located 90 miles from the university. The community also serves as the county seat and thus houses both local and county government offices. Five retail and hospitality businesses from this community participated with University A in the project along with the local director of the Main Street and economic development program, the mayor, and the chamber of commerce director.

University B worked with a rural community (population 6,000) which was located about 50 miles from the university. The community is within 25 miles of a major metropolitan area, has a diverse economic base, and was recently named one of the 100 best small towns in America. The community has an active downtown business development organization, and is involved in several statewide initiatives to enhance the community. Five retail business owners, the city mayor, community development director, and regional chamber of commerce director participated actively in the project. See Figure 1 in the Appendix.

The content and delivery sequence of the modules in the RETU is illustrated in Figure 1. Because the unit is flexible, it was possible blend RETU activities into existing course frameworks at both universities, resulting in slightly different models at each institution. Students at both universities completed module one and conducted the community analysis in module two in a similar fashion. University A student teams took part in an initial full-day site visit to the community where they participated in a seminar with community leaders on rural issues and community/ business needs. Student teams also conducted business owner interviews and toured physical businesses. The teams followed up with business owners by phone and email and then visited the community at the end of the semester to present their final community and business analysis, strategic business recommendations, and strategy tool-kit. University B students visited the community at the beginning of the semester to tour the community and interview local business owners. Community partners visited the University B campus mid-semester to attend the presentation of module two community analysis results. University B teams visited the community again at the end of the semester to present their final business proposals.

Following completion of the third module, University A students employed a business consulting approach, where they completed a marketing plan for their designated business client based on module two community and business analyses. The focus of the consulting project was to enhance business competitiveness and resilience. Student teams also completed an additional layer of market analysis including an internal business audit for use of/potential for experiential strategies, SWOT analysis, market trends, identifying the business mission and vision, short and long-term business objectives, assessment of community branding efforts/needs and relationship of the client business to the community brand image and business climate. Finally, University A students compiled their data to develop written marketing plans and prepared 'toolkits' of innovative business strategies and marketing materials for business clients. The 'toolkit' was presented to the client in visual and digital form and served as a primary tool and guidance for business owners in implementing the recommended strategies and marketing materials for their businesses. The written project and toolkit aided in enhanced business competitiveness and

resiliency and included potential marketing, positioning, pricing, promotional, experiential, and merchandising strategies, as well as a cost/benefit analysis and sources/budget for suggested business enhancements.

After completing the three modules, University B students presented results of their research from the community analysis in written and oral formats to community partners mid-semester in an open seminar arrangement. The seminar format enabled students to engage in discussion with community partners, which was valuable in setting the stage for building strategies for their final project. The seminar also gave community partners the opportunity to gain insight into students' perceptions of the community, and to discuss strategies to enhance the attractiveness of their community to Millennials. University B students completed a business proposal as a final project, where student teams used results of the community analysis to develop proposals for potential retail and service-based businesses in the partner community. Community partners were particularly interested in proposals for new businesses that would be attractive to younger consumers. Student teams developed and presented five business proposals to community partners, including plans for an organic gardening store, bookstore, farm-to-restaurant/coffee shop, a casual clothing store, and a craft store.

UNIT ASSESSMENT

Unit assessment was accomplished in several ways. The activities in the modules provide opportunities for multiple levels of thinking and learning, enabling learners to develop knowledge and understanding in a practical setting, to apply and analyze information in new ways and to combine elements of learning into new forms and assess the value of ideas (Christopher, Thomas & Tallent-Runnels, 2004). Assessment tools, including multiple choice, true/false and essay questions, and writing and presentation rubrics are embedded in the RETU and were used to measure learning at these multiple levels. In addition, student and community participant attitudes and perceptions related to participation in the unit activities were assessed.

Student attitudes and perceptions

A primary objective of the RETU was to foster interest and appreciation for rural entrepreneurship opportunities among college students. At the conclusion of the semester, students in the pilot groups were asked to provide feedback pertaining to their interest in the topic, appreciation for entrepreneurship as a career, and attractiveness of rural entrepreneurship and lifestyles. Results of the student feedback survey are presented in Table 1 (Appendix).

Students in both pilot groups indicated that the information presented in the RETU was interesting to them, and that their understanding of issues facing entrepreneurs in rural communities was enhanced. Comments from participants further elaborate the value that the students placed on the learning experience:

"This was a great project to be a part of and a great learning experience. Not only did we get to apply what we have learned, we got to have professional interaction with real employers. This was a very intense project and a lot of work, especially because we were preparing the reports and proposals for [the community]."

"I would recommend this project to other students--it was a great learning experience and good to work with real businesses."

Both groups also agreed quite strongly that unit activities resulted in an appreciation of the positive and negative aspects of owning a small business in a rural community. One student commented, "This was a real eye opener. I never realized how many things factor in to the success of a small business." Another stated, "This project allowed me to better understand the life of an entrepreneur much more so than a simple lecture/test method would have. And I was able to help the community in the process!"

Students were less enthusiastic about the attractiveness of owning a small business in a rural community for someone in their age group. One student explained, "I feel as though there are many opportunities for entrepreneurs [in this community], but with my degree, I feel like the chances and lifestyle I am looking for lie in a bigger, urban city." Likewise, students were less enthusiastic about lifestyle opportunities in rural towns, although they expressed admiration and appreciation of the culture and environment that they encountered during the project. One student remarked, "Working with people who have such a passion for their community was a great experience to work with and see." Although new college graduates may not find small towns an appealing setting in which to launch their careers, there is some evidence that younger, college educated individuals are migrating back to rural areas in their 30s and 40s (Artz, 2003). Thus, the activities in this unit may serve to provide a reference for future career and life plans for students as they move into later stages of their lives.

It is interesting to note that there were significant differences between pilot groups at the two universities on several feedback items. T-tests revealed significant differences in mean responses of the two pilot groups on question two, (t= -2.117, df 37, p=.04); question three (t= -2.459, df 37, p= 02), and question five (t= -3.245, df 37, p=.002). Although the pilot test design did not include tracking of data that could explain these differences, it's possible that differences in student attitudes at the two sites could have arisen from course and instructor variations, community environment, or student experience and background. Although both communities were considered rural, differences in population size, the nature of business challenges, community economic base and proximity to metropolitan areas could have accounted for variations in student perceptions.

Community partner feedback

Feedback data were also collected to ascertain the value of the RETU to community partners, and to gather data for improving the RETU. Ten responses were received across both communities. Questions and mean responses are presented in Table 2 (Appendix).

Overall, community participants rated the experience as useful and enjoyable, and were quite positive about participating in the future. The respondents also agreed very strongly that one of the key benefits of participating was the opportunity to learn more about how they could appeal to younger individuals as future residents and visitors to their communities. One community participant explained how the project has spurred several initiatives in the community:

"The college students gave us a new perspective. We gained insight into their desire to use technology to learn about community and business events, and to be able to be connected when they visit our community. As a result, the community development staff is looking into increasing access to wireless internet in the downtown area. The students also gave us insight on the need to improve our visual cues in the downtown area. We are

looking into a program to further enhance our building facades and storefront marketing and displays."

Community partners also commented on the value of working with the student teams. One business owner stated, "I got some really amazing ideas to improve my store." Several others also emphasized the value of gathering fresh, new ideas from their interactions with the students, and noted that they had already implemented some of the ideas that the students presented in their final projects. When asked how the project could be improved, a number of the respondents expressed the desire to spend more time with the students. One respondent suggested a program to bring students into area businesses for summer internships.

The feedback from community partners reaffirms many elements of Hogner and Kenworthy's (2010) framework for service learning that guided our strategic approach for the community partnership project embedded in the RETU modules. The applications of the RETU modules were reciprocally based with university, community, and business needs and interests integrated throughout project planning, implementation, and assessment. Students were immersed in the rural community setting which allowed for a substantial degree of appreciation for the issues, challenges, and benefits of doing business in the context of small, rural communities. The project not only allowed for attainment of course objectives regarding retailing, merchandising, marketing, and entrepreneurship, but also provided hands on learning and the opportunity to create valuable business knowledge, strategies, and materials to benefit real businesses and communities. Sharing of knowledge and findings from market analyses and needs assessments allowed for a deeper understanding of course content, rural issues, business decision making, and the responsibilities of community membership. Finally, there was an opportunity for students to present findings to business owners and then reflective assessments were collected from both perspectives.

PROJECT IMPACT AND FUTURE APPLICATION

The RETU had significant impacts at each phase of the collaboration with the rural community partners. Following Sargent and Ward's (2004) framework for successful academic collaborations, it became apparent during Phase 1-Initiation that numerous rural communities in need of business resiliency strategies and overall business assistance to aid in their competitiveness and long-term sustainability. While it was only possible to work with two communities in the pilot project, there was considerable interest expressed in the project by multiple rural communities at both university sites. There appears to be a clear gap between what is being done for start-up business assistance in small communities by federal, state, and local programs and the resources available to struggling existing businesses. Projects such as the service learning application embedded in the RETU may provide not only beneficial learning opportunities for students, but also fill a critical need for rural business assistance that can over time promote community and business resilience. Different needs may exist for economic development and business assistance, varying with community size and economic base (e.g. agricultural, manufacturing, tourism), thus these aspects will be considered for future extensions of the RETU. It is further hoped that student exposure to retail and hospitality related employment opportunities available in rural areas may encourage them over time to consider business management or ownership in small communities. For future projects, findings suggest that more student orientation to small rural communities may be beneficial prior to the project

and/or more time intensive project applications in the community setting. Overall, sizeable increases were noted in awareness and understanding by students in areas such as issues facing entrepreneurs in rural communities, owning a small business in a rural community, and opportunities for rural business ownership.

In project Phase 2-Clarification and Phase 3-Implementation, important network connections were forged between the universities, rural communities, business owners, and community leaders and organizations (e.g. chambers of commerce, Main Street and other economic development programs). These groups in turn realized the content included in retailing and hospitality programs and the value creating potential they could bring to their businesses and communities. Universities are increasingly being called upon to provide outreach and show relevance of their programs to students and parents, communities, government officials, and other key program stakeholders (Coldstream, 2003; Watson, 2003). Activities such as the service learning project included in the RETU provide a key means of demonstrating program relevance to all concerned constituencies.

Finally, Phase 4-Completion allowed students to hone their presentation and salesmanship skills to present their findings and recommendations to business owners and community leaders. Business owners and community leaders found numerous benefits regarding the project outcomes. One Main Street director commented:

"Thanks for bringing new, fresh ideas from young people to our community. Businesses are already implementing many of the marketing strategies and other branding and store image aspects to improve their businesses."

Several business owners stated:

"I enjoyed the fresh thoughts and ideas from the students' view. The tool-kit booklet and strategies prepared by the students was very helpful—I could not have done this by myself."

"I implemented the new store layout suggested by the students and the customers really like it!"

In summary, the needs of small, locally owned businesses are numerous in the context of changing and evolving rural communities. Economic uncertainty in the broader environment presents even further challenges. Service-learning partnerships provide opportunities for collaboration, resource generation, and new ideas for struggling rural communities and businesses. Service learning projects also provide relevant, real-world experience for students contemplating entrepreneurial career paths and create awareness of potential employment opportunities. The findings presented in this paper provide evidence that service learning projects can create a win-win situation where students gain valuable knowledge and expertise, universities build important linkages with communities and other stakeholders, and rural communities and businesses enhance their resilience and ability to sustain over time.

The RETU with full modules is available online at http://www.wmich.edu/ consumer/rural-entrepreneurship/

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APPENDIX

Module One: Rural Entrepreneurship: Context, Trends and Issues	
Overview	This module presents an overview of trends and issues affecting the rural marketplace and opportunities for rural entrepreneurship, with emphasis on retail and service businesses. The module is designed as an introduction to Module Two Community Analysis which is a course project that partners learners with rural business owners and community leaders to complete a community assessment exercise.
Purpose/Learning Goal	The purpose of this module is to introduce learners to trends and issues in rural America, and to identify opportunities and challenges related to starting and owning a small business in a rural area.
Objective	Learners will be able to identify and explain current issues facing rural communities and retail businesses operating in these communities.
Rationale/ Justification	Many rural communities are struggling to maintain their economic and social vitality in the face of massive economic and demographic changes in the last several decades. One avenue for economic development and retention of residents is encouraging entrepreneurship. Introducing college level learners to rural entrepreneurship opportunities presents an alternative career opportunity for those interested in owning a small business. Rural communities may benefit by attracting younger, college educated entrepreneurs to their communities.
Time for module	60-75 minutes
Audience	Undergraduate/graduate level adult learners enrolled in entrepreneurship, small business management or retailing/merchandising course.
Materials Needed	Power point file: Rural Entrepreneurship Readings: Mc Granahan & Wojan (2007), Marcketti et al., (2006).
Evaluation	True/false, multiple choice and essay questions.

Module Two: Conducting a Community Analysis	
Definition of Content	Sources and uses of data for community analysis project; data collection, analysis; ethical considerations.
Purpose/Learning Goal	To introduce learners to the procedures and considerations involved in planning for, collecting, analyzing and using market and community information to develop a business proposal. Also focus on collecting data from human subjects.
Objective	Learners will be able to discern differences between primary/ secondary research, qualitative/quantitative data; understand how to locate, evaluate and use secondary sources of information to develop an analysis of the community.
Rationale /Justification	Planning is key to success for new businesses. An essential tool in planning for a new business is a systematic analysis of the community marketplace. The analysis includes a socio-economic profile of the community, as well as an inventory of the programs and services available to businesses, existing infrastructure, a history of the community, and information on the community's quality of life. This module prepares learners to locate and evaluate sources of data that will be used in the community analysis. The results of the analysis may be used to develop a feasibility analysis, new business proposal or plan to enhance an existing business.
Time for module	60-75 minutes; module may be delivered in a computer lab.
Audience	Undergraduate/graduate level adult learners enrolled in entrepreneurship, small business management or retailing/merchandising course.
Materials Needed	Community Analysis Guide, Entrepreneur Interview Activity, Community Leader Interview Activity Ethics and Research in the Community Assign reading prior to session: Tolbert, C.M. (2005).
Evaluation	See Module Three for rubric.

Module Three: Presenting Community Analysis Research	
Overview	This module will guide learners in presenting the results of applied research in written form. The module applies basic business writing principles to writing the Community Analysis Report. Instructor may elect to edit or expand topics based on learner needs.
Purpose/Learning Goal	To introduce learners to concepts of business writing, including writing style, tone, organization, presenting and writing about data, citing work, appendix development and collaborative writing.
Objectives	Learners will be able to understand basic principles of business report writing; plan and prepare a well organized, clearly written business report using community analysis data.
Rationale/Justification	Written communication skills are essential in the business environment. This module provides learners with information and skills necessary to produce a high quality Community Analysis report for dissemination to Community Resiliency Project community partners. The skills developed in planning and preparing the Community Analysis Report can be applied to business writing in a wide variety of contexts.
Time for module	60-75 Minutes. Time will vary based on level of learner competency.
Audience	Undergraduate/graduate level adult learners enrolled in entrepreneurship, small business management or retailing/merchandising course.
Suggested Materials	• Community Analysis Report Overview and Requirements • Power point file • In class activity: Planning Business Report • Kuiper (2009) or equivalent business report writing text.
Evaluation	True/False, Multiple Choice, Short Essay questions. Planning the Community Analysis Project group exercise; Rubric items to assess writing proficiency.

Figure 1. RETU module content and delivery sequence

Module one: Rural entrepreneurship: context, trends and issues.
The purpose of this module is to familiarize learners with challenges and opportunities in rural US communities. The module includes an overview of demographic, economic and social changes that have influenced rural communities in the last half century. Strategies for revitalization are discussed. Field trips to rural communities, community leader presentations, and entrepreneur interviews can be used to enhance learner understanding of rural issues.

Module two: Conducting a community analysis project
This module introduces learners to the procedures and considerations involved in planning for, collecting, analyzing and using market and community information to develop competitive business strategies. The module includes a discussion of primary and secondary research, qualitative and quantitative data, and ethical issues in data collection and reporting. A Community Analysis Guide is included to direct learners in locating data. Site visits may be planned to rural communities for additional data collection.

Module three: Writing and presenting community analysis research
Module three guides learners in the preparation of applied research in written report form. The goal of this module is to introduce learners to basic business writing principles to plan and prepare a well organized, clearly written business report using data collected during completion of module two. Skills developed in this module may be applied to a wide variety of contexts. An oral presentation or seminar may be included in this module.

Suggested culminating activities
After completing the RETU, instructor may build on module learning by assigning a business proposal or consulting project assignment. Learners are able to apply knowledge about rural community challenges and opportunities to develop a business plan for a new business in the partner community. Alternatively, learners may use information gained in completion of the modules to develop marketing strategies and toolkits for existing businesses in the partner community.
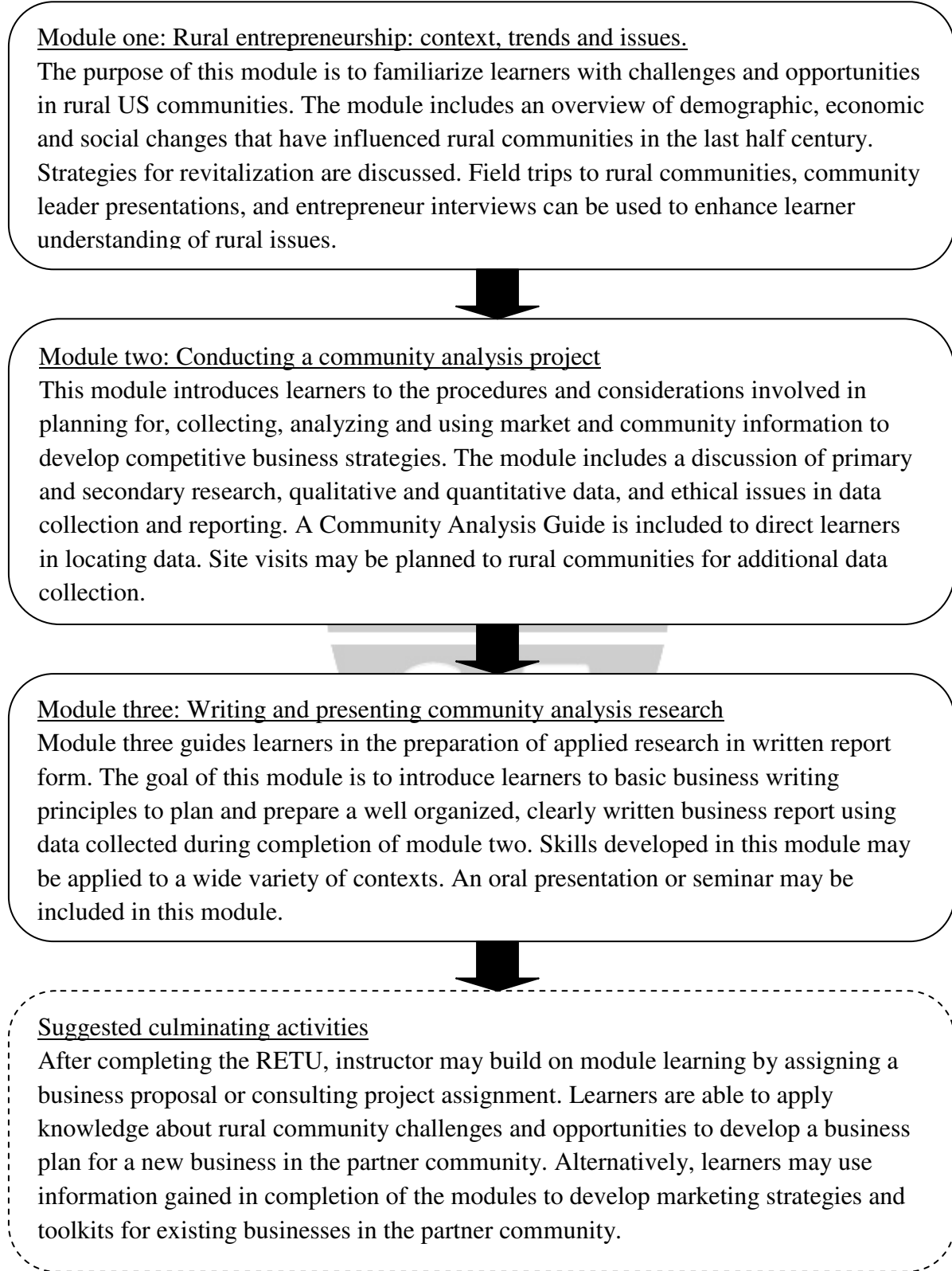
Table 1. Post-participation student perceptions and attitudes

Five point scale: 5=Strongly agree; 1=Strongly disagree	University A Mean response n=22	University B Mean response n=18
1) The information covered in the unit was interesting to me.	4.13	4.47
2) I have a better understanding of issues facing entrepreneurs in rural communities.	4.54	4.94
3) I have an appreciation for the positive aspects of owning a small business in a rural community.	4.73	5.0
4) I have an appreciation for the negative aspects of owning a small business in a rural community.	4.73	4.82
5) Rural communities offer attractive career opportunities for people my age.	2.82	3.64
6) Rural communities offer attractive lifestyle opportunities for people my age.	3.0	3.29

Table 2. Post-participation community participant perceptions and attitudes

Five point scale: 5=Strongly agree; 1=Strongly disagree	Mean response (both communities) n=10
Participating in this project was useful to me.	4.9
Participating in this project was enjoyable.	5.0
I have a better understanding of issues related to younger individuals and my community.	5.0
I would be interested in participating in a project like this again.	5.0