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Community Engagement: A Student Perspective

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As students in the multidisciplinary master's of bioregional planning program at the University of Idaho, we worked with a local community during our first year studio class. In 2010 we partnered with Priest River, a small (population 1,700) north Idaho town. This town's heritage is tied to the logging industry, and the town is experiencing high unemployment due to mill closures and a reduced demand for wood.

As one of several teams working on different areas of community development, we began by meeting with key stakeholders. We brainstormed ideas for joint goals and objectives and collaboratively decided on three succinct goals: establishing a common vision, creating a toolbox for the community to use for future engagement projects, and identifying leaders to ensure project sustainability after we graduated.

During our time there we faced unanticipated hurdles. The biggest obstacles were student constraints, a compressed time frame, community apathy, and lack of community trust. As students, we had tight schedules and limited budgets. We funded most of our own transportation and food expenses and also supplied most of the meeting supplies. Over the course of the semester, we hosted five community engagement meetings.

Time is an essential component when working with a community, and it was difficult to accomplish our goals in a 16-week semester. A core group of about 10 residents consistently attended our meetings, but we also had casual participants. Due to our time constraint we could not continually revisit materials and conversations from the earlier sessions, which left new participants confused and unwilling to commit to leadership roles. Residents were curious about the long-term sustainability of the project, but when presented the opportunity to assume leadership, no one stepped up to the challenge. The distance to Priest River from Moscow, Idaho, about a 3-hour drive, limited the number of meetings we could host and affected our ability to fully gain the trust of local residents. Without gaining acceptance we were not able to match community's expectations with our abilities and time frame.

Though we were invited to the community by leaders seeking new vision and community

resilience, other community members remembered previous failures and assumed failure. In the face of the obstacles, it was hard for us to garner support or have productive dialogue. Those who invited us didn't always show up to the meetings because of their previous negative experiences.

Despite these obstacles and setbacks, we still met our pedagogical goal: to learn first-hand what collaborating in a rural community can be like. We were also able to remind the community through our presentation of the successes they had been able to engineer during our tenure with them. These successes included strengthening the existing Citizens of Priest River Group and obtaining several economic development grants, including funding for a community garden and an economic development specialist. A critical lesson learned from this project was the importance of working with a physically and socially accessible community. Placing student teams in a community full-time could be beneficial in gaining the trust of local residents and building enthusiasm for ideas generated. Creating momentum for planning goals is a long-term process that requires the full commitment and engagement of community members to create the kind of support needed for community change. Community development requires a major commitment of time, while community engagement takes patience and trust.

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About the Authors

The authors are all 2011 M.S. graduates in bioregional planning and community design from the University of Idaho. The program is multidisciplinary and encourages learning by working in local communities. Morgan Bessaw received her B.S. in environmental science from the University of San Francisco. Genevieve Gerke has a B.S. in environmental studies from The College of Idaho. Melissa Hamilton received her B.S. in biology from the University of South Carolina. Liza Pulsipher received her B.S. in conservation social sciences from the University of Idaho.