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# AECN 376-Rural Community Economics: Engaging Students in Learning

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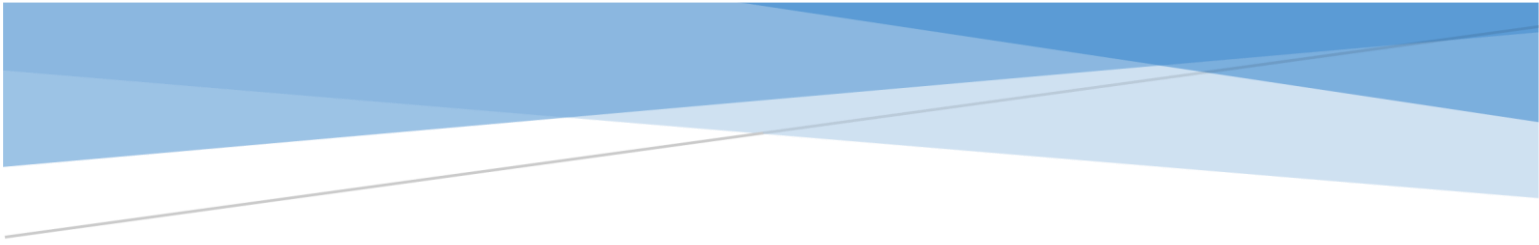
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# AECN 376-RURAL COMMUNITY ECONOMICS

## ENGAGING STUDENTS IN LEARNING

Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.  
(Chinese Proverb)

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## **ABSTRACT**

AECN376-Rural Community Economics attracts students with different economics background and interests. In the three previous years I taught this course I was struggling to find a balance in class activities to make the course more engaging and effective to all students. The usual method of delivery is lecture along with PowerPoint slides. While this is the dominant form of pedagogy, particularly in higher education (Harvard Magazine 2015, Time Magazine 2012), an increasing amount of research indicates that the somewhat passive learning environment of the lecture does not reach all students with the same efficiency. In creating this portfolio, my goals were to develop opportunities to increase student engagement in class and improve my teaching by creating stronger association between the things I wanted my students to learn and the assignments used to teach them. In addition I used students' feedback provided by the midterm course evaluation as a reflection tool of my teaching practices, course design, and students' perception of the course.

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## **DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE**

I was recently hired by the UNL-Department of Agricultural Economics to teach courses related to Rural Community Economics and develop an online graduate certificate in Community Economic Development. My target course for this project is AECN376-Rural Community Economics offered through the Department of Agricultural Economics ([Appendix 1](#)). This course is based on an overview of economic and social concepts relevant to understand rural communities and the issues and problems they face. It is designed to introduce the issues challenging rural and regional economies, and the theories, concepts, and tools of rural and regional economic development. The goal is to integrate theory and practice and apply them to economic development problems. Economic tools and analysis are presented for practical application. Additionally, this course is about economic decision-making and its consequences (intended and unintended) for community development in rural communities. It provides the economic basis to understand the public decision-making process and the skills necessary for constructive participation in community affairs. This class meets for 75 minutes, twice a week, every spring semester.

AECN376 is the only course in the Department of Agricultural Economics that deals directly with rural community development issues at the local level. It is an applied course that helps to narrow down the distance between the university and rural communities. Students enrolling in this class are required to take Agricultural Economics 141 or Economics 210 or 212 previously.

**Student Demographics:** AECN 376 typically has an enrollment of about 35 students. In the first day of the 2018 spring semester, I asked students to fill out a survey to gather their demographic and other information. The data collected provided a profile of the mix of students in the class. I have been teaching this course for 4 years and used the same textbook. In 2018, AECN 376 was

composed by 33 students. Figure 1 shows that most students are from the Department of Agricultural Economics (Agricultural Economics, Agribusiness, Natural Resources and Environmental Economics). The majors represented by the large number of students are Agricultural Economics (10 out of 33) and Agricultural Education (9 out of 33), followed by Agribusiness (8 out of 33). According to Figure 2, the majority of the students are juniors (17 out of 33) and seniors (11 out of 33). Only 5 students were sophomore and none freshman. Figure 3 shows that the majority of the students (27 out of 33) are from rural Nebraska. The course requires AECN 141 or ECON 210 or 212 to be taken previously and is not a part of a course sequence. Although it is an elective for the Agricultural Economics Department's students, it is a required course for those majoring in Agricultural Education.

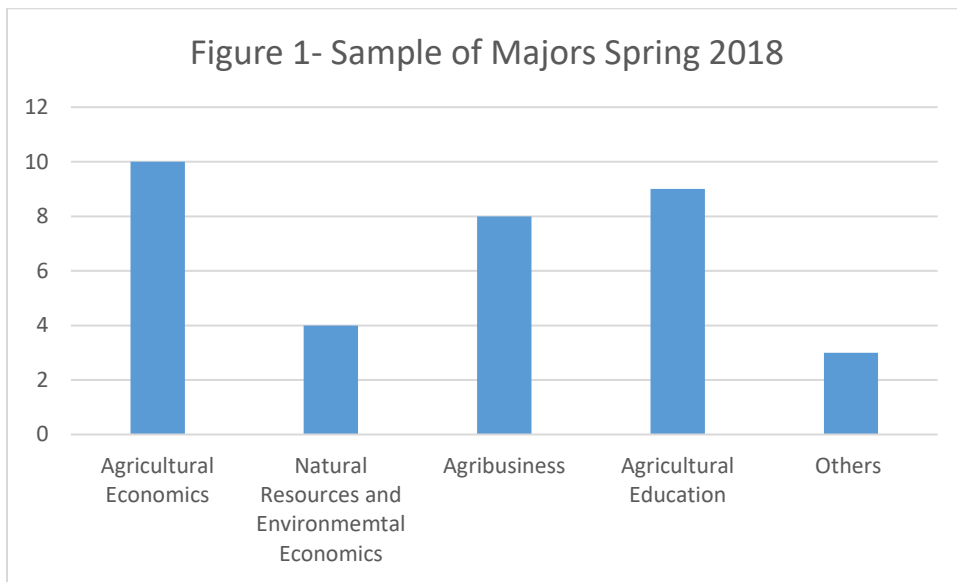


Figure 2 - Student Population

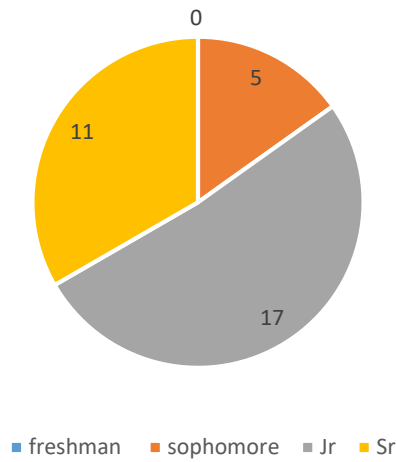
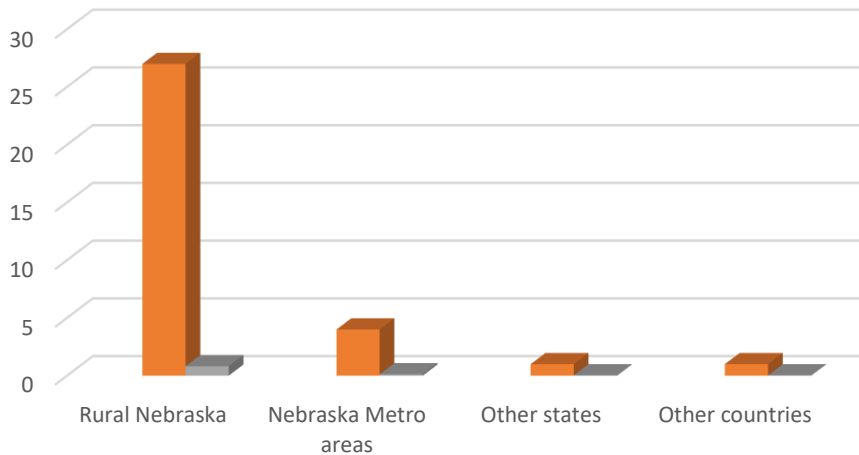


Figure 3- Students Hometown Area



**Goals for this class:** Overall students are expected to understand the functioning of local economies and become aware of their roles in community development. Students first start the course thinking they know everything about their communities just to realize they know very little about the dynamics and reality of the places where they spent most of their lives. There are many myths about rural life that are not supported by data and research. This romanticized view prevents rural communities from being proactive and creates resistance to change. This course

works as a reality check. Even if these students choose not to work in the field or actively engage in community affairs, this course will enable them, at least, to make more informed decisions about the future of their communities. By the end of the course students are expected to:

- 1) Recognize contemporary rural economic development issues and challenges.
- 2) Identify and explain principles and concepts from the field of economics and sociology which affect the viability of communities and their evolution over time. It is critical for them to understand the difference between economic development and economic growth. I want them to be able to take some basic steps that might be undertaken by a community examining its economy and its economic future.
- 3) Find data and apply analytical techniques in assessing local economic conditions: what are the current economic conditions in the community? What components of the community have been growing or what components have been declining? What are the community's options for improving its economic future and which of those options should be pursued first?
- 4) Articulate a vision for "sustainable communities" in a holistic perspective with practical implications. What are the sectors of the local economy and how are they related?

Since most students are from rural small communities and are planning to return to their rural communities, this course provides them the opportunity to learn about the needs and strengths of their local areas.

Currently this course is the only face-to-face and undergraduate course I teach and it is been a challenge to keep students with varied levels of economics background motivated and engaged throughout the semester. The format of classes is basically lectures that many times seem tedious to students with stronger economic background, mainly the Agricultural Economics majors,



while the other students often complain about the format and content of the course. It is well known that active student engagement can be helpful in providing more interest and understanding of the discipline. By engaging students I expect students to move from memorizing concepts, to explaining those same concepts, to using those concepts in real-life problem solving situations, to analyzing under what conditions those concepts apply (or do not apply), and ultimately to making decisions.

### **TEACHING RURAL COMMUNITY ECONOMICS**

When I first began college, I dreamed of working in a large bank or consulting firm and getting a big paycheck. It did not take me long to discover that Economics is much more than finance, mathematics, demand and supply. I remember sitting in my Labor Market class studying the impact of race, gender, and age on wages and my indignation towards the markets. Then my International Economic Development class opened my eyes to poverty and inequality. My interest in Social Economics was evident and took over my academic goals. After getting my masters in Economics I decided it was time to switch to Community Development, a program dedicated to empowering communities, individuals, institutions, and policies to promote healthy local economies and quality of life. AECN376 and the other courses I teach at the University of Nebraska gave me the opportunity to combine both Economics and Community Development. It is a contribution to the large society by promoting knowledgeable leaders, professional staff and citizens who understand and can apply the theories and practices of community and economic development, so vital to enhance the quality of life in rural communities. Students taking this class have a strong interest in the place they work, play, and live. This course challenges their understanding of economics in the sense that puts the community wellbeing first, and the idea that economic development evolves from community development. We consider theories,

misconceptions, contradictions, and stereotypes. My hope is to show students that they are part of a very complex and interconnected world. This course is designed to help students become more informed and active community citizens.

In the past, my lectures were guided by a comprehensive set of PowerPoint slides, engaging with students in a conversational style. During lectures students spent most time trying to copy as much as they could from the PowerPoint materials, not paying much attention to what I had to say. Students suggested that I posted my PowerPoint on Canvas before lectures, what I did believing that it would free them from copying and help them to concentrate on my talk and engage in discussion. Students kept silent and disengaged. By the most part their exam grades reflected their apathy in class. Many times I left class with no clue if students had learned anything. I felt it was because students were not engaging in the learning process and not coming prepared for class. Providing them with lectures, readings, PowerPoints, assignments, and sporadic in-class activities was not being enough for them to show understanding of the conceptual material and real-world application. I really felt like students and I had been stuck in our ways of doing things for so long. I was teaching the way I was taught, the way I believe most professors are still doing it, and students grew used to it. And I realized that I was expecting more from them than they were able to provide.

I needed to find a better way to engage students with the material. In my mind the course is critically important, particularly to those going back to their rural communities and I needed to make it more relevant to them so they could see economic development in the real world in a meaningful way. My objectives for this portfolio includes a renewed focus on increasing student engagement with the material and each other. I wanted to find better ways for students to construct and synthesize information and help them link the course material to the real world at a

deeper level. This peer review project is a great useful tool I needed for documenting my teaching strategy, student learning outcomes and for highlighting all the effort I invest in my career to become a better teacher.

## **TEACHING METHODS AND MATERIALS**

### **New Teaching Methods Introduced in 2018:**

**First Class Ice-Breaker:** Usually, students and instructors feel a little awkward in their first meeting. This year, in addition to the regular introduction where I introduce myself and ask students to introduce themselves by saying their name, major, class, and hometown, we did an ice-breaker activity to promote a stronger connection among students. I asked students to stand up and introduce themselves to 3 people they have never met before, ask questions, and identify 3 things they have in common. Some were a little uncomfortable at first but once they started talking I could see the anxiety lowering and the laughs starting. I gave them 10 minutes to mingle around and meet their peers. The goal of this activity was to make it easier for students to form relationships early in the semester so they can work together both in and out of class. At the end students volunteered to share their experiences and new friends.

The ice-breaker activity worked well. Some students observed that the activity gave them opportunity to speak with students they often see on campus but never had the chance to meet. Others mentioned they had more in common than they had imagined. One of them said: “it is nice to know that although we have just met each other we share some friends and interests in common.” I believe this activity prepared the ground for active engagement from the onset and created an environment where the learner is expected to participate and the instructor is willing to listen. The icebreaker helped to establish a positive environment and provide an opportunity for students to get to know one another and the instructor.

**Discussion Questions:** As part of students' preparation for class, every time a new topic is introduced they were asked to do the readings referent to the topic, write two discussion questions, and email them to the instructor before class. Instructions and examples were provided to students to clarify what types of questions are most effective for generating discussion and how they can be used to deepen their own learning (e.g. by making connections among topics or readings, or by identifying assumptions or counter-arguments). Table 1 below was discussed during class. Students were told that analysis, synthesis, and evaluation questions generally provide more in-depth discussion of the topic and to avoid Yes or No questions. The submission of the discussion questions were part of their participation grade.

Table 1- Types of Questions for Discussion Questions

Type of Question	Explanation	Example
Knowledge	Questions that check for content knowledge	Describe...? Who, what, where, how...?
Comprehension	Explain, interpret, and give examples.	What was the contribution of...? Can you summarize...?
Application	Requires application of knowledge	How is ... an example of...? Why is ... significant?
Analysis	Requires application of principles	What evidence do you have for...? What are the parts or features of ...?
Synthesis	Requires combing ideas	How would you analyze...? What might happen if you combine ... and ...?
Evaluation	Requires a judgement	Do you agree with...? What is the most important...?

After receiving the questions, I selected the best ten questions that covered different aspects of the readings, particularly the big ideas. In the beginning of the class I divided students in 5 groups, each group received 2 questions for discussion. After 5-7 minutes of discussion, each

group shared their questions and answers with the rest of the students. The goal of this activity is to engage students with the material before they come to class and then learning from each other during the discussion process. At the end of the discussion I asked questions to give them the opportunity to clarify any misinterpretation or more complex concepts. Typically I asked: “What did you find most confusing about what you read?” and we continued from there, reviewing the main concepts and using examples to connect them to real world situations. A few students gave positive feedbacks about this activity, such as, feeling “enforced” to do the readings and getting the opportunity to have their questions answered.

This activity was somewhat successful. It provided more interaction among students and between students and instructor, helped some students to prepare for class, freed instruction time for examples and deeper understanding of concepts. However, there were a few setbacks in the process: based on the questions formulated by some students I could tell they had not done the readings, not all students participated in the discussion, and most times discussion took longer than planned.

**Quiz:** two quizzes were offered during the semester as a method to help students to prepare for classes and improve overall performance. These quizzes provided opportunities for students to assess their learning, identify gaps in their knowledge, and build on their existing knowledge. The quizzes were taken online and consisted of 20 multiple-choice questions. Students could retake the quiz 3 times, the final grade was the highest of all scores. This activity was well received by students. Most students scored high in both quizzes since they could use course material and retake the test 3 times. In the process quizzes helped students to retain their knowledge and find out where they needed to focus their attention.

**Midterm Course Evaluation (MCE):** Although I always encourage students to talk with me if they have concerns about the course, students sometimes do not feel comfortable communicating their concerns to the instructor openly. My goal was to provide students a chance to respond to the course anonymously. It also sent students the message that I take their ideas seriously and that I am dedicated to improving the course and their learning. MCE is a great tool for instructors to improve their courses halfway through, and make teaching adjustments specific to the particular needs and desires of current students. Students were asked the following questions:

- What is working well for you in this class? What are you struggling with?
- What is helping you learn? What is not working?
- What could the instructor change to improve your learning experience in this class?
- What could you do differently to improve your learning experience in this class?

I wanted them to understand that I view them as my partners in this venture, their success is my success and vice-versa. When I handed the evaluations, I told them that I value their responses, which will help me to understand their perspectives on the course, my teaching, and the assignments. I encourage them to be specific in their comments and asked for their suggestions on how to improve the course.

I read all the 22 evaluations and prepared a PowerPoint to share the results with them. I went point by point explaining what it could be done or not and why. I felt they understood my points. By doing this I encouraged students to communicate with me about the course throughout the semester. A student sent me this message after the discussion of the midterm evaluation:

“I really appreciate your receptiveness to feedback and your desire to make the class better. I am hopeful that through the changes and better discussions that the class will be even more enjoyable.”

**Lecture break every 15-20 minutes (spaced teaching):** Research on student’s attention span shows that it is effective to break-up lectures with periods of active learning in order to increase comprehension of the material and boost attention during the lecture. By introducing these breaks my goal is to keep the material personally relevant to the students. During these breaks I tried to engage students by grounding theoretical concepts in real-life situations and drawing on examples from students’ daily lives. I also asked questions about the topic and used exercises like pair & share to promote interaction and test their understanding. Sometimes, during these breaks, students shared funny events and curiosities about their lives and communities. I felt that alternating between lectures and learning activities gave students the opportunity to engage in the course content actively, which better enabled them to acquire and retain information.

**Field trip assignment ([Appendix 2](#)):** A field trip to Crete, Ne was organized with the help of the Crete Economic Developer to make learning more effective and real. It was an opportunity for the students to experience community economic development in real life. The field trip consisted of a city tour highlighting the main economic and social aspects of the community and a panel with community leaders (city administrator, chief of police, CEO of the local hospital, Director of Doane University, and others). In order to maximize the educational effectiveness of the field trip, students worked as teams analyzing specific community issues and writing a report. Each team focused on one of the following issues:

- Retention/Expansion of existing businesses and firms
- Retailing, recreation, and entertainment

- Business and Economic Recruitment and Entrepreneurship
- Education, Community Foundations, Social Capital, Community Involvement, Volunteerism, and Leadership development
- Health and Wellness Services, Housing and Residential Infrastructure and development

Before the field trip, teams met in and off class to prepare for the visit by investigating the local economy; the background of their assigned topic; identifying key questions to ask and issues to raise during the visit; and finally discussing and preparing final team reports. The field trip provided a hands-on experience to the students who acted as economic development consultants to the community. At the end, the final reports produced by each team were shared with Crete's economic developer who shared the result of the field trip with all local leaders involved in the activity. The feedback from this activity was very positive and students lamented they did not have enough time to do a better work. A student sent me her thoughts on this experience:

“I loved the field trip and benefited greatly from it and the research I did about Crete. I wish we had more time to deeply research and recommend better strategies that would make a difference in the community.”

**Study Guide:** this tool was introduced halfway in the course by suggestion of the students (midterm course evaluation). The idea behind it is to facilitate learning, understanding, and some memorization of the large amount of information included in the course. According to students, a study guide would be extremely helpful for them to organize information and prepare for exams. Before the second midterm I provided the students with a list of 25 questions covering the main concepts and their applications.



## **Recurring Teaching Methods**

**Readings:** Required readings are a learning opportunity and critical to the understanding of new concepts and theories. In my course, readings are necessary to meet the course objectives and do well in exams and other learning activities. In general students are required to read 15-20 pages from the textbook or articles each week. Based on class engagement and exam scores I believe only a few of my students do the readings weekly. After introducing discussion questions and quizzes I felt students were doing the reading or at least previewing them before class.

**Homework Assignments:** These are designed for students to understand economic concepts and apply material from class to real-life and personal scenarios. Usually, students complete six assignments focused on the economies of their hometowns, that is, the social and economic analysis is based on data from students' hometown. These assignments provide support information and arguments that can be used to complete the final project.

**Think, Pair & Share exercise:** It is an interactive learning activity where students work together to answer a question about an assigned topic. This activity requires students to think individually about the questions and share their ideas with classmates. It is composed for 3-4 questions designed to test students' comprehension and application of the material. I used to apply this activity at the end of each topic, generally at the end of the class. Now I have been using it in the lecture break-ups and has helped students to engage with each other and increase comprehension of the reading material or lecture.

**Exams:** three exams are applied during the semester. They are used to make judgments about the quality of student learning and focus on the most important content emphasized during the course (main concepts, issues, and skills). Usually, exams are composed by multiple-choice,

short questions, and essay questions. The first midterm of 2018 was the same applied in 2017 because I wanted to compare the performance of students before and after the introduction of the new learning methods (described previously), the other exams were slightly different from previous years, mainly because I had to adjust the material to the slower pace adopted in 2018 due to discussions. In 2017 the average grade of Midterm 1 was 79 (100 as the highest grade) and in 2018 the same exam produced an average grade of 84, a significant increase that can be explained in part by the adoption of a more interactive and demanding class.

**Final Project:** In this individual project, students are expected to articulate a vision for “sustainable communities” in a holistic perspective with practical implications. Here I really hope they will be able to consider the links between economics with the other parts that constitute a community (natural, cultural, and social aspects of the community). Application of theory, concepts, and tools of analysis are critical pieces of this learning experience. Students use their own communities as the focus of this project.

## **ANALYSIS OF STUDENT LEARNING**

### **Critical Thinking**

**Discussion Questions:** This is a new activity introduced this year in order to prepare students for a new subject. Before each chapter material, I asked students to read the material and prepare 2 discussion questions to be discussed and shared with one another. Although I provided students with instructions about writing effective discussion questions, only a few of them prepared questions that promoted critical thinking that goes beyond the mere acquisition and memorization of basic information. Most of the questions did not require any reflection on the information received and the answer could be easily found in the textbook. Even after I called

their attention to this problem there was not improvement in the quality of the questions.

However, because I could select the best questions to be used in class, I chose the best ones from the poll and the discussions were somewhat reasonable.

Reflecting on this activity over the semester, most students took it seriously in the sense that they read the material and prepared good enough questions; others did not do the readings at all and prepared poor questions. My impression is that even the students who were doing the work (and learning something in the process) did not understand how to design questions that promote deeper thinking. In the future I will revise the guideline on how to write effective discussion questions and emphatically ask students to truly prepare questions that promote critical thinking. Several students mentioned that this activity was helpful because they were been “forced” to do the readings, discuss the material in class, and understand the material. Students’ comments:

“If I like it or not, when you make us bring a question to class, it really helps with the concepts.”

“The questions that you are making us to fill out is really helping to understand the material.”

“The discussions make the lectures easy to follow and understand.”

In part I agree with them. They are doing the readings and coming more prepared to class.

However, next time I use this activity I will emphasize the reasons we are doing it, what they should achieve, and how completing this activity accurately will help them to move away from superficial toward deeper levels of learning, not just receiving information but also transferring them to a more personalized context and understanding. I will also add some extra motivation by grading this activity separately instead of being part of the participation grade.

**Final Exam:** This is an example of an essay question from the 2018 Final Exam, this answer (from an A student) mentioned 16 different concepts and strategies explored in class (in bold).

Last year, in a similar question, the answer of an A student contained 10 main ideas and concepts learned in the course. From my perspective, this is a huge progress in terms of deeper thinking, connecting the dots, and looking at the bigger picture!

Answer: One major talking point for the future and **sustainability** of rural communities is **population decline**. How will our small town survive with a shrinking population? When will we lose X,Y,Z, stores? These are common questions asked throughout a shrinking rural population in the Great Plains region. Even though evidence has been supporting this decline for decades, change is certainly not out of the picture. Population decline leads to the **migration of manufacturing and retail** to more urban communities. The **customer appeal, amenities, and agglomeration of firms**, more and more business are attracted to locate in urban communities. According to conventional paradigms, rural communities will continue to slowly **lose businesses - and younger generations-** to urban communities. Furthermore, the **clustering** of farms will reduce the number of “family farms” which is only one factor of population decline. I believe population decline is the root of all branches- less **entrepreneurial opportunities**, less **money circulating in the local economy**, more incentive to build elsewhere. Change needs to happen at the local level, towns need to be more appealing for younger generations to stay.

Breaking off from conventional thinking, I believe that population decline will plateau eventually, possibly by 2035. One thing that I believe and hope that rural communities do is adapt the latest **technology**, keeping stride with urban communities. This doesn't necessarily mean build billion dollar hospitals, but rather have **community managers** up to date with the latest trends and **strategies to attract a wider consumer audience**. A lack of technology is a big issue I see in rural communities. The sad thing is, technology will keep adapting, while these business owners will be stuck in past times. This is one factor why younger generations keep

leaving. Staying on the economic spectrum, more and more rural companies are carving out **niche markets** within their communities. With increased transportation and a wider audience, I believe that local niche markets will become more common, given the current path we are on. By 2035, it will be easier to **sell specific items across the nation**, and a small community can support that. Furthermore, niche markets will increase the **location quotient** enough to stimulate the local economy. Finally, I think that rural economies will adapt and survive in the long run. With enough **engaged citizens**, and community pride, it will be hard for some of these towns to simply “die out”. These communities have battled change before, and will keep fighting it forever. With more **educated young citizens**, change will come soon enough, so that these communities can thrive again.

## **Engagement**

**Think, Pair & Share:** This strategy provides students time for thinking on a given question individually, allowing them to articulate individual ideas, discussing these ideas with a partner, and sharing their views with the class. This learning strategy promoted higher level of classroom participation than just posing questions to the students in general. According to feedbacks, students prefer this activity over small group discussion. One of the explanations for that is that they can work better with the person who sits beside them instead than a group of “not so familiar” students. Although I understand this viewpoint, I believe it is helpful to them to work with different peers who offer different ideas and experiences. Next time I use this activity I will emphasize the importance of working with different students and views. This activity worked mostly well, the only problem was that the discussion time always went over the limit planned initially. Because I did not want to interrupt the discussion, they led to some delay in the program. I believe this activity needs to be better planned and executed. Also, I will probably

have to make some changes in the program to accommodate the extra time spent with class discussions without compromising learning goals and quality.

**Discussion Questions:** It worked partially. As described previously, this activity somewhat encouraged students to do the readings and come prepared for class. However, during small group discussions not all students engaged. Probably because the questions were not prompting discussion (the quality of the questions were discussed previously) or they did not do the readings and had no clue about the discussion topic. Another reason is that some people are introvert by nature. People who did the readings felt more comfortable during the discussions regardless the quality of the discussion questions. Next time I use this activity I will request questions that promote deeper understanding and work in smaller groups to encourage participation of all. Also, grading this activity separately will probably motivate students to prepare for discussion.

**First-class ice breaker:** This strategy was very successful. Giving students the chance to get to know each other set the tone for the whole course. Compared to other classes I taught before, these students felt much more engaged and comfortable with each other. They were willing to take more risks by sharing their opinions about a diversity of topics and communicating more among them and with me. From day one I had students approaching me in class, in my office, and by email to discuss the course and share examples that happened in their hometowns related to the class material.

**Field trip:** This activity was extremely successful and popular among the students. Along with the opportunity to see how community economic development works in real life, students used the concepts learned in class that are required by this experience. In addition, the connection among students that occurs on field trips improves the learning experience and creates a support

system as they move forward in the course. It gave me the opportunity to know the students better in terms of how they understand the world around them. Although everybody took advantage of the field trip somehow, the lack of collective participation during team work was pointed out for some students even knowing they would be graded by each other ([Appendix 3](#)). Next year I am planning to divide the class in 2 groups and take the groups to two different communities. Each group will be subdivided in smaller groups and then, they will follow the same field trip model and exercise done this year. This way, we will have smaller groups analyzing the same topics in two different communities. I believe this change will make the team work more focused and engaging and will give us the opportunity to compare the performance of the communities participating in the assignment.

### **Midterm Course Evaluation**

This analysis was based on anonymous feedback provided by 22 students. By the end of February, I gave students 15 minutes to respond the midterm evaluation open-questions. I told them I would appreciate honest answers and suggestions and that my goal was to improve teaching and learning methods and practices. This tool was essential to capture students' individual experiences and opinions about the course and instructor. In students responses I looked for similar comments and patterns, then compiled similar ones in categories. The results of the evaluation were presented and discussed in class. During the discussion we decided changes that could be made in the course to improve learning.

Table 2 confirms that student learn in different ways but most students identified “group discussions” and “use of real world examples” as the course strengths. Based on this feedback some activities like “pair and share” were designed to discuss more applied questions and situations.

Table 2: What are the strengths of this course?

	# students	proportion of total
Lectures	3	12%
Group discussions	6	24%
Use of real world examples	6	24%
Interactive	3	12%
Use of textbook	1	4%
Slides online	2	8%
Real world project/assignments	3	12%
New knowledge	1	4%

Table 3: What are you struggling with?

	# students	proportion of total
Economic concepts/theories are confuse	2	10%
Being engaged all time/long lectures	5	25%
Tests are vague/hard	3	15%
Lots of material	7	35%
Random group discussions	1	5%
Getting students to engage in discussions	2	10%

Table 4: What is helping you to learn?

	# students	proportion of total
posting slides	3	16%
group activities/discussions	7	37%
real world examples	2	11%
readings	1	5%
assignment/quizzes	2	11%
lectures	2	11%
formulating discussion questions	2	11%



Table 5: What is not working?

	# students	proportion of total
Group activities are not effective	3	23%
Readings are not effective	3	23%
Lectures alone are not effective (PowerPoints)	2	15%
Too many concepts to be memorized	3	23%
Not going to class	2	15%

Table 6: What could the instructor change to improve your learning experience in this class?

	# students	proportion of total
Add more examples, videos, speakers	2	10%
Add more applied examples	4	20%
Add more discussions	6	30%
Add more assignments	1	5%
Add study guide before tests	3	15%
Add online lectures	1	5%
Add points for attendance	1	5%
Shorter lectures	2	10%

As a result of the analysis (Tables 2-6), I decided to reduce lecturing time and introduce a study guide, more in-class activities, videos, and opportunities for group discussion to connect theories and real world experiences.

Table 7 shows how students could contribute in the learning process and helped students to reflect on their role in the classroom. Since this course is viewed as a partnership between students and instructor, they are also accountable for improving the outcomes of this experience.

Table 7: What could you do differently to improve your learning experience?

	# students	proportion of total
do the readings	4	16%
take better notes	3	12%
study more	2	8%
work on focusing/listening	3	12%
be more engaged/vocal in class	4	16%
enjoy/engage group work	2	8%
review notes/ slides after class	3	12%
review slides before class	1	4%
come to class often	1	4%
spark interest of other students during discussions	2	8%

## IMPACT ON STUDENTS

The process of building this portfolio helped me to create an evaluation plan, collect evidences of student learning, make changes based on the data, and create strategies for improvements.

Below are students observations about the new course strategies sent to me voluntarily:

### General feelings about the class

Since I won't have a chance to see you today to tell you in person, I'll take a few minutes to share some of my feelings about the class. I am very impressed with your teaching style and ability. I love that you are passionate about helping others to actually LEARN. I do believe, you are planting seeds in people that will bear fruit in the future so thank you for your contribution to making our community/state better!

I just wanted to let you know that I enjoyed your class and thought the material was stuff that I could actually use someday!

I learned so much more than I thought I would from this course. It was surprisingly (to me) very valuable educational experience. I believe the benefits of this course would be difficult to quantify as it will likely have lasting impacts on students and communities.

### **Class Project**

It was a great class, and I definitely learned a lot of information. The class project was really cool, and I learned information about my community that I would've never known before. Finally, it was a fun class, and best wishes for the future!

### **Midterm Course Evaluation**

I was impressed when you asked for feedback in the middle of the semester and actually adjusted and implemented change where you could in response to that feedback.

### **Discussion Questions and Discussion**

Discussion questions are really helpful because it makes sure that I at least skim the readings before class and give us a chance to talk in groups. Things sink better that way.

I'm glad you weren't discouraged by the initial lack of discussion participation in class. I hope you continue to put forth the effort to solicit involvement like that because I found it to be very beneficial.

### **Field Trip**

The field trip was my favorite part of the course. It was fun and informative. Learning about the challenges and successes of communities like Crete gave me hope for the future of my small community.

## **Study Guide**

The study guide was long but a lifesaver. Thank you so much!!! I was feeling lost within the theories, it helped me to organize my thoughts, understand the concepts and see how they fit together.

## **FINAL REMARKS AND OUTCOMES**

The best part of attending the Peer Review of Teaching was to learn that there are other instructors going through similar challenges while striving for excellence. It gave me the opportunity to discuss my teaching with a community of colleagues concerned about the quality of teaching campus wide. When I began this portfolio my main concern was the lack of student engagement in my AECN376 and I learned so much more in the process. It gave me the opportunity to rethink my syllabus and reorganize my teaching strategies towards student learning. The incorporation of more collaborative learning strategies and less reliance on lecturing was beneficial to students and to myself. There was some pushing back from a few students who felt uncomfortable and challenged by this strategy. However, based on the self-report of most of the class, there was a better connection between theories, concepts, analytical tools and aspects of the real world. This connection is critical for students to understand community economic development in a more holistic and critical way. That was my main goal and I felt like a much better instructor at the end of this semester. I felt students were instigated to apply the acquired knowledge to their own experiences with much deeper meaning. Although this outcome may not be evident in quantitative approaches used to assess the success of a course, from the discipline point of view, I believe this was the best course experience I had in the last few years. I learned that is okay to take risks, explore alternatives, and assess my own outcomes. Overall, the new methods of teaching have made the course more effective and

involved students in the educational process. The quizzes worked as checkpoints for students to test their learning and contributed to higher test scores. Discussion questions along with the other engagement activities, while partially successful, allowed students to be more active in class, connect class material to real world experiences, and challenge their own thinking about the discipline, and there is potential for improvements in the next semesters. The field trip project was very effective in giving students the opportunity to work in groups, analyze a local economy, and experience community economic development in action. As a consequence, the quality of the term project also improved significantly when compared with previous classes. The ice breaker activity in the first day of class brought students and myself closer, a relationship that I prefer to call partnership that lasted the whole semester providing me with great joy in teaching this course, more than in previous years.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

While the final outcome of completing the Peer Review of Teaching was positive, I realized that there are adjustments to be made and new methods to be tried. Next time I teach this course I will have to set clear objectives and time for learning activities and methods. If you let it to run too long some groups will stray off task. While discussions allow active involvement they need to be better structured and the outcome communicated back clearly for closure. Although most students enjoy group discussions, not everybody does. I believe smaller groups may be more effective in encouraging participation as a whole. During the Peer Review of Teaching I learned of different strategies, such as Conceptmap, flip teaching, and media-making tools (videos) that could reach those students averse to discussions and promote deeper understanding of the material. Next semester, I plan to do even better than this year. I see teaching as a process that can always be improved. AECN376 is critical to the education of UNL undergraduate students as

its benefits extends beyond the classroom. As one of the students said: “I believe the benefits of this course would be difficult to quantify as it will likely having lasting impacts on students and communities.” I feel confident I am better prepared to provide students with this level of knowledge for many years to come.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1

### AECN 376 – Rural Community Economics Spring 2018 University of Nebraska-Lincoln 3 Credit Hours

**Credit Hours:** 3

**Instructor:** Daniela M. Mattos, PhD

**Email:** [dmanhanimattos2@unl.edu](mailto:dmanhanimattos2@unl.edu)

**Phone:** (402) 472-1906

**Office Hours:** You are welcome to stop by anytime I am in my office to ask questions about the course content or otherwise discuss school or related professional matters. If you prefer to meet at a specific time, or are unsuccessful finding me in, feel free to email me to set up an appointment that is convenient for you.

**Class Time:** Monday & Wednesday: 1pm-2:15pm in Keim Hall 262

**Course Description:** Investigation of economic and social concepts relevant to understand rural communities and the issues and problems they face. Also provides the economic basis to understand the public decision-making process and the skills necessary for constructive participation in community affairs.

**Course Outcomes:** Having successfully completed the course, students will be:

- Recognize contemporary rural economic development issues and challenges.
- Able to apply analytical techniques in assessing local economic conditions.
- Identify and explain principles and concepts from the field of economics and sociology which affect the viability of communities and their evolution over time.
- Articulate a vision for “sustainable communities” in a holistic perspective with practical implications.

**Prerequisites:** Ag. Economics 141 or Economics 210 or 212

**Textbook and Readings:** Students are expected to do the readings, come prepared for discussion, and participate in discussion.

**Textbook:** Community Economics: Linking Theory and Practice, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Ron Shaffer, Steve Deller and Dave Marcoviller, Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

**Supplementary Reading Material:**

Item to download from Internet: Community Economic Analysis: A How to Manual  
<http://ncrcrd.msu.edu/uploads/files/133/ncrcrd-rrd186-print.pdf>



Articles and book chapters from other sources will be made available and assigned for reading throughout the course

### **Class Policy:**

Given the size of the class and the nature of the subject matter, a more informal, interactive approach will be used as much as possible. This means active student participation in classroom discussion is essential. Informal interaction will also tend to simulate the decision-making environment, where you can test your thinking against that of others.

This approach requires that you read assigned materials carefully ahead of time so that as much of the class time as possible will be spent in spirited discussion and exploring new ideas. This will expand the networking opportunity and learning from one another.

### **Student Evaluation and Late Policy:**

Assignments and projects are expected in on the due date. Late assignments and projects will have 10% per day deducted up to five days late. After five days, an assignment or project will be accepted and marked with 50% deduction. Early assignments are welcome so if you know that you will not be able to turn in your assignment on the day it is due, feel free to turn it earlier. If you have an emergency, please contact me as soon as possible to make other arrangements.

Requests to take a make-up exam must be approved prior to the scheduled exam. Missed exams will be given a grade of zero unless documented health or family matters are provided within one week of the missed exam.

### **Grading**

The final grade will be a weighted arithmetic average (see weights below) of all grades obtained during the semester in exams, assignments, and class engagement/participation. All exams are cumulative.

Assignments/Quizzes:	20%
Midterm 1 Exam:	20%
Midterm 2 Exam:	20%
Final Exam:	15%
Class Project:	20%
<u>Class participation:</u>	<u>5%</u>
Total:	100%

### **Course Grades**

A+=97	B+=87	C+= 77	D+=67
A =93	B =83	C =73	D= 63
A-=90	B-=80	C-=70	D-=60

## Class Project

There will be a class project that each student is expected to complete. This project can best be described as a data exercise where I want you to pick a community (population: 500+) or county (preferably in rural Nebraska) and provide an economic profile of the region. The idea here is that you will collect the relevant socioeconomic data, use the tools developed in class and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the local economy. The idea is that there is a “story to be told” about the local economy and your job is to uncover that story and tell it. You will find that there is a wealth of data that is available, particularly at the county level, and that it is possible to become “awash in data”. Your job is to shift through the data and use the key pieces of information to tell that story. Use [http://www.nepadd.com/CEDS\\_Final\\_Draft\\_1\\_4.pdf](http://www.nepadd.com/CEDS_Final_Draft_1_4.pdf) as an example. However, this study (example) is still missing the economic analysis and recommendations, sections that are required in this course’s final project.

Below are the sections that should be included in the final report:

A. Summary Background: A summary background of the economic development conditions of the region.

Demographic and socioeconomic data, including the human capital assets of the area and labor force characteristics such as the educational attainment of the working age population;

Environmental, geographic, climatic, and cultural (including historic preservation) and natural resource profiles (e.g., mining resources, timber, fisheries, aquaculture, eco-tourism, etc.). Ideally, an environmental baseline for the area should be developed that identifies any environmental elements that may affect and/or constrain the regional economy. Relevant published literature for the region should be researched and dialogues established with the environmental regulators at the local, state and federal levels (for example: the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), state environmental agencies, etc.), as well as the State or Tribal Historic Preservation Officer. Please contact the appropriate EDA regional office for more information and guidance.

Infrastructure assets of the area that relate to economic development including water, sewer, telecommunications/broadband, energy distribution systems, transportation modes, etc.;

Emerging or declining clusters or industry sectors – and their past, present, and projected impacts on the region’s competitive advantages and ability to build capacity for economic development;

Relationship of an area’s economy to that of a larger region or state (including global perspective), with particular regard to local advantages or disadvantages;

Factors that directly affect economic performance in the area such as workforce issues; innovation assets; industry supply chains; state and local laws; financial resources; transportation systems; energy costs; business, personal, and property taxes; bonding capacity; land use patterns; and

Other factors that relate to economic performance in an area such as housing; health services; educational, cultural and recreational resources; and public safety.

B. SWOT Analysis: An in-depth analysis of regional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

C. Economic Analysis: Use of economic tools to evaluate the local economy.

D. Recommendations (flowing from the SWOT and economic analysis).

E. Project Presentation: Prepare a 5 minutes PowerPoint presentation of the highlights of your project and present it to the class.

Marking scheme:

Quality and quantity of material	40%
Demonstration of knowledge of the subject	20%
Development of an argument	10%
Writing style (including grammar and organization)	10%
Referencing (throughout paper and references)	10%
Independent and original thought	10%

### **Student Conduct:**

Laptops are allowed, but their purpose is for taking notes (not browsing the internet, checking emails, Facebook, twitter, etc). Cell phones, iPads, and other devices should not be out during class. All devices must be turned off and out of reach during exams and quizzes.

### **Academic Integrity:**

Plagiarism or any other form of cheating in examinations, term tests or academic work is subject to serious academic penalty. Cheating in examinations or tests may take the form of copying from another student or bringing unauthorized materials into the exam room. Exam cheating can also include exam impersonation.

A student found guilty of contributing to cheating in examinations or term assignments is also subject to serious academic penalty.

If I catch you cheating on a quiz, exam, assignment, or paper you will receive zero credit for the quiz, exam, assignment, or paper. I may also pursue harsher penalties through the University.

Students are expected to adhere to guidelines concerning academic dishonesty outlined in Section 4.2 of University's Student Code of Conduct (<http://stuafs.unl.edu/ja/code/>). Students are encouraged to contact the instructor for clarification of these guidelines if they have questions or concerns.

### **Special Needs:**

Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the instructor for a confidential discussion of their individual needs for academic accommodation. It is the policy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide flexible and individualized accommodation to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office, 132 Canfield Administration, 472-3787 voice or TTY.

## **Non-Discrimination Statement:**

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln is a public university committed to providing a quality education to a diverse student body. It is the policy of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln not to discriminate based on gender, age, disability, race, color, religion, marital status, veteran’s status, national or ethnic origin, or sexual orientation. This policy is applicable to all University administered programs including educational programs, financial aid, admission policies and employment policies. This policy is enacted in accordance with University of Nebraska Regent’s policy and with various federal and state discrimination laws including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Inquiries regarding discrimination issues may be directed to the Office of Equity, Access, and Diversity Programs, 128 Canfield Administration Building (402) 472-3417. You may also contact entities such as the Nebraska Equal Opportunity Commission and the Department of Education, Civil Rights Division.

## **Information for emergency response:**

- **Fire Alarm (or other evacuation):** In the event of a fire alarm: Gather belongings (purse, keys, cellphone, N-Card, etc.) and use the nearest exit to leave the building. Do not use the elevators. After exiting, notify emergency personnel of the location of persons unable to exit the building. Do not return to building unless told to do so by emergency personnel.
- **Tornado Warning:** When sirens sound, move to the lowest interior area of building or designated shelter.  
  
Stay away from windows and stay near an inside wall when possible.
- **Active Shooter**  
  
Evacuate: if there is a safe escape path, leave belongings behind, keep hands visible and follow police officer instructions.  
  
Hide out: If evacuation is impossible secure yourself in your space by turning out lights, closing blinds and barricading doors if possible.  
  
Take action: As a last resort, and only when your life is in imminent danger, attempt to disrupt and/or incapacitate the active shooter.
- **UNL Alert:** Notifications about serious incidents on campus are sent via text message, email, unl.edu website, and social media. For more information go to: [Http://unlalert.unl.edu](http://unlalert.unl.edu).

Additional Emergency Procedures can be found here:

[http://emergency.unl.edu/doc/Emergency\\_Procedures\\_Quicklist.pdf](http://emergency.unl.edu/doc/Emergency_Procedures_Quicklist.pdf)

## Course Outline

As the course progresses, additional guest speakers, readings, and references may be provided. The outline is subject to changes and alterations as the course progresses. Check Canvas for updates.

Week	Date	Topic	Reading
1	01/08	Syllabus overview	
1	01/10	Intro to Community Economic Development	Shaffer pg 1-8,202-205, 236-241 Community Economic Development – Key concepts (Mississippi State Extension): <a href="http://gcd.msucare.com/sites/gcd.msucare.com/files/community-economic-development-key-concepts.pdf">http://gcd.msucare.com/sites/gcd.msucare.com/files/community-economic-development-key-concepts.pdf</a>
2	01/15	<b>NO CLASS: Martin Luther King Jr Day</b>	
2	01/17	Important Concepts in CED	Social Capital and Our Community (Univ. of Minnesota-Extension) <a href="https://www.extension.umn.edu/community/civic-engagement/docs/social-capital-community.pdf">https://www.extension.umn.edu/community/civic-engagement/docs/social-capital-community.pdf</a>  Social capital: a necessary and sufficient condition for sustainable community development? <b><u>Ann Dale</u></b> <b><u>Lenore Newman</u></b>  <i>Community Development Journal</i> , Volume 45, Issue 1, 1 January 2010, Pages 5–21, <a href="https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn028">https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn028</a> Published: 11 August 2008
3	01/22	The Enduring Argument for CED	Canvas (Leigh and Blakely, Ch1) Rural America at a glance 2017: <a href="https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/85740/eib-182.pdf?v=43054">https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/85740/eib-182.pdf?v=43054</a>
3	01/24	Community Development Preparation and Planning	Canvas (Rhonda Phillips)
4	01/29	Community Development Preparation and Planning	
4	01/31	<b>Guest Speaker</b>	
5	02/05	Economic Fundamentals in Community Development I	Schaffer Ch 1: pp.8-18
5	02/07	Economic Fundamentals in Community Development II	

6	02/12	Economic Growth Theories	Schaffer Ch. 2
6	02/14	Technology, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship	Schaffer Ch. 9
7	02/19	<b>Midterm 1</b>	
7	02/21	Spatial and Locational Economics I	Schaffer Ch. 3
8	02/26	Spatial and Locational Economics II	Schaffer Ch. 3
8	02/28	<b>Guest Speaker</b>	
9	03/05	Community Market Dynamics - External Markets: Export Base Theory/ Tools for Analysis	Schaffer: ch.4 and 14
9	03/07	Community Market Dynamics Cont.- Internal Markets: Central Place Theory	
10	03/12	Labor Market Economics Readings: Schaffer	Schaffer Ch.6 Rural Employment at a glance: <a href="http://webarchives.cdlib.org/sw1rf5mh0k/http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib21/eib21.htm">http://webarchives.cdlib.org/sw1rf5mh0k/http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib21/eib21.htm</a>
10	03/14	Labor Market Economics Cont.	
11	03/19	<b>NO CLASS: Spring Break</b>	
11	03/21	<b>NO CLASS Spring Break</b>	
12	03/26	Non Market Goods and Services: Quality of Life/ Amenities	Schaffer ch.9
12	03/28	Local Government and Public Goods	Schaffer ch.10 and 11
13	04/02	<b>Midterm 2</b>	
13	04/04	Field Trip	
14	04/09	NO CLASS	
14	04/11	Field trip project presentation	
15	04/16	Practicing Effective Community Economic development	Schaffer ch.13
15	04/18	Wrap-up section/ Sustainable Development The Future of Community Economic	Schaffer ch.12 and 13

16	04/23	Final Project -Student Presentations	
16	04/25	Final Project -Student Presentations	

## APPENDIX 2

AECN 376

RURAL COMMUNITY ECONOMICS

### Field Trip Team Assignment

In order to maximize the educational effectiveness of our **Crete, NE** field trip on April 04, 2018, we will work as teams to focus particular attention on specific issues. This will involve some preliminary investigation of Crete and its economy; backgrounding of the assigned topic; identifying key questions to ask and issues to raise during the visit; and finally discussing and preparing final team reports of the Crete trip with particular emphasis on the assigned focus topics (if you are team #1 you will focus on topic #1 and so on).

Team project reports will be due April 11.

#### Team Topic Assignments

- 1) Retention/Expansion of existing businesses and firms
- 2) Retailing, recreation, and entertainment
- 3) Business and Economic Recruitment and Entrepreneurship
- 4) Education, Community Foundations, Social Capital, Community Involvement, Volunteerism, and Leadership development
- 5) Health and Wellness Services, Housing and Residential Infrastructure and development

#### Organization:

Plan for the assignment (in-class): Each group will choose a leader to coordinate the team work, conduct Internet research on Crete and your group's topic (background, social-economic characteristics, community website, SWOT, strategies for attracting/retaining young people, etc; strategies related to your group topic used by other communities). With its topic for analysis in mind, prepare questions to be answered by Crete community leaders.

#### Professional Report Content:

Cover page (community pictures)

Acknowledgements (community leaders, developers, department of Agricultural Economics, etc)

Introduction (community background, socio-economic characteristics, general description of Crete's physical, natural, social resource, etc)



Community economic analysis (Location quotient of the main local industries, employment ratio, Riley's law, TAC, Pull factor)

Key findings on your team topic (SWOT)

Attracting/Retaining Young People (see below)

Recommendations (to do list)

Conclusions.

References.

In addition to your topic, all groups must include a discussion on:

How do communities like Crete attract and retain young people?

Your team must identify at least three ideas that would attract and retain young people to/in rural communities like Crete.

## APPENDIX 3

### *Confidential*

#### Group Peer Evaluation Form

Group: \_\_\_\_\_ Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

The Crete Field Trip assignment is to be a team effort. Ideally, the contributions of team members will be equal. However, this may not always be the case. In fairness to individual team members the need may arise to adjust the team grade for individuals on the team who have contributed more or less than others. In addition to instructor observations, any adjustments will be based on input received from the Confidential Peer Evaluations. Each team member must complete and submit the attached form by email until April 18.

Carefully evaluate the performance of each member of your group, **including yourself**, over the period of the York Field Trip group project.

5 – Outstanding 4 – Good **3** – Satisfactory 2 – Poor 1 – Unacceptable

	Your Name: _____	Group Member #2 Name:	Group Member #3 Name:	Group Member #4 Name:	Group Member #5 Name:	Group Member #6 Name:
Did his/her fair share of the work that was required						
Completed his/her share of the work on schedule						
Was well prepared for the actual presentation.						
Attended group meetings/ answered emails when required to do so.						

<b>The average for this person (1 to 5)</b>						
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