



Looking Back Across the Years: Alumni Reflections on a Community Design Service Learning Experience

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Introduction

Since 1997, the Community Design Team (CDT) at West Virginia University has worked with local residents in rural communities across the state in assessing and developing options for community and economic development. The university engages communities through volunteer teams of faculty, professionals, and students. The teams are multi-disciplinary and include representation from the fields of public administration, civil engineering, landscape design, public health and resource economics. Students play a crucial role in these visits. They contribute ideas, apply knowledge, and learn through the process. While a visit lasts only two-days, team members are immersed in the community. They interact with community members and stakeholders, are hosted by local families, and convene public meetings. Individual team members often pursue follow-up projects with communities. These usually involve faculty-led efforts that provide technical assistance in such areas as grant writing, transportation planning, and landscape design. They also include service learning projects that provide students the opportunity to learn about community development while lending assistance rural communities. As a result, lasting relationships are often built with communities.

West Virginia University's Division of Public Administration has been a key player in the CDT program. Because the division has a deep commitment to student and faculty engagement, the CDT program has proven to be an effective platform to advance a mission of service learning. To date, 41 visits have been conducted to 37 communities in the state. In each, team membership has included student from disciplines across the university. These team visits have been incorporated into class projects and plans of study for various disciplines, including public administration. For over a decade, public administration faculty and students have been frequent participants on team visits. Students have learned a great deal from these experiences while making real and interactive contributions to community development. The efficacy of this

involvement has been demonstrated in reflective papers and learning portfolios developed by students.

This article takes a closer look at the student experience in the Community Design Team process. In a departure from customary assessments of student-learning in applied contexts, this study focuses on alumni who have established careers in community development, land-use planning, local government, and other related areas in public administration. The intent of the article is to link both immediate and lasting learning experience to participation in the CDT. Such an approach can help gain insight on how both specific activities and the general experience in service learning and civic engagement provide educational opportunities for students. By focusing on graduate students, this presentation also seeks to contribute to an area of service learning evaluation where research has been limited (Imperial et al. 2007).

The CDT Program: A Brief Overview

The West Virginia Community Design Team was founded with the expressed purpose of coordinating university responses to the needs of small communities in design, planning, and civic capacity building efforts. The West Virginia CDT program was patterned along the lines of the Minnesota Design Team which embraces a multi-disciplinary and collaborative approach to community design characterized by visits by teams of professionals, students, and academics to a community over a two day period (for a full discussion, see Merhoff 1999). Like the Minnesota program, the West Virginia CDT makes use of a planning *charrette* approach comprising of an onsite visit that occupies approximately two days. The size of the volunteer teams varies from about 12 to 20 members. The composition of each team changes with each visit – though many of the faculty members involved have served on numerous teams. Communities apply for a CDT visit and a nominal fee is charged to help underwrite visit costs and to encourage community investment in the process. Preparatory work involves application review and team selection by the CDT steering committee and an advance visit by a few team members to clarify program purposes and to connect with a host organizing committee. The visit itself involves formal meetings and functions to engage citizens and stakeholder groups in conversation and dialogue and to present team findings at a concluding town hall meeting. Less structured activities include team member tours of the community and frequent interaction with host committee members for purposes of information, context, and coordination of the visit. One of the most important attributes of the visit is that team members stay with host families, rather than lodging in hotels or other facilities. Visits usually start with an organizational meeting on a Thursday evening, are followed by a day of listening sessions and community tours on Friday culminating with a public meeting that features various interactive exercises to engage citizens and team members in dialogue and discussion. Saturday is dedicated team deliberations which focus on formulating observations and recommendations about the issues, needs, challenges, and opportunities facing the community. The visit ends with a “town hall meeting” which is held on Saturday night when the team presents its findings to the community. After the formal presentation, team members interact individually or in small groups with citizens to answer questions and to follow up on points made in the presentation. Following the visit, the team provides a final written report and conducts a day-long debriefing and update visit with a few team members (Plein 2003, Plein and Morris 2005).

Since its founding, the CDT has taken on its own distinct characteristics that reflect the context of university engagement with rural communities. The CDT program is now noted for the diverse makeup of its teams from a disciplinary and professional standpoint (Plein and Morris 2005, Walsh and Schaeffer 2009). The CDT is also known for its emphasis on combining visual depiction and presentation of community needs and prospects through drawings and images offered by landscape architects, engineers, and other design professionals. These complement a heavy emphasis on exploring and collaboratively developing more abstract and long-term elements of community development, such as civic capacity and social capital. The CDT program is also distinguished by its detailed reports of team visits. Some communities have used these to organize follow-up efforts, seek external resources, and guide action. In some

cases CDT teams have revisited communities to focus on specific needs. These “second generation” visits have been organized around such themes as the recruitment and retention of health care professionals, developing heritage tourism capacities, and flood recovery efforts.

The CDT’s most distinguishing characteristic is that it is anchored in an academic institution. This university base allows for a diverse set of skills and resources to be drawn on for team visits. It also offers a stable administrative home for the program. The CDT has enjoyed recognition and support from university leadership. There is dedicated funding that helps to sustain program administration. It is often cited as a valued outreach program by senior administrators and in official university communications. For example, the CDT has been featured in various university-related publications and reports on WVU’s engagement efforts (see Behringer et al. 2004, “How Can Small Rural Communities...” 2009, Hammond 2011). Most importantly, this program has served as a springboard for applied and service learning activities for both undergraduate and graduate students. Undergraduate students from such fields as interior design, history and landscape design have been involved. Graduate students from many different disciplines have participated, including: parks, recreational and tourism management; history; public health; civil engineering; and public administration.

The CDT program has been the subject of a number of analyses and reviews. These include reports, papers and publications on the overall purpose, evolution, and experience of the program (Plein 2003, Plein and Morris 2005), explorations of CDT influence on local civic and leadership capacity (Loveridge and Plein 2000), analysis of team attitudes and perceptions of team members and citizens during the visits themselves (Walsh and Schaeffer 2009); evaluation of CDT efficacy as measured by participants and community members immediately following three early team visits (Stead 1998); an exploration of how faculty encounter community through community design (Plein 2004); assessments of incentives for, and barriers to, faculty engagement in the CDT process (Loveridge 2002, Schaeffer and Loveridge 2009); exploration of the program’s links to fostering “networked curriculum” across campus (Plein 2008); and an analysis of the CDT as a mechanism for encouraging rural health professional recruitment planning (Shannon 2003).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of alumni who participated on the team while they were students in West Virginia University’s Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. In addition to helping us to better understand the CDT process and its value to students, this study responds to a call for more assessment of graduate student experiential learning (Imperial et al. 2007). Because MPA students have been involved significantly in the CDT program over time and because experiential and applied learning is encouraged in their curriculum, their perceptions and viewpoints are especially useful to explore. Of special interest are their perceptions regarding lessons learned from the experience, motives for participation, assessment of the efficacy of the community development model used, and lasting impressions of the CDT experience.

Methodology

This study relies on the results of semi-structured interviews that were conducted by the author with WVU Master of Public Administration alumni who had participated in the West Virginia Community Design Team between 1998 and 2007. A total of 18 MPA students participated in the CDT during this time period. Current contact information was found for 16 and a total of ten were successfully interviewed for this research effort. The interview process followed standard conventions of ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted by telephone, with the interview sessions lasting from approximately one-half hour to one and one-half hours. In one case, the respondent replied by email and provided written responses. While the total number of individuals interviewed might be limited, the opportunity for extended interviews with respondents provided an opportunity for what sociologists have called “thick description” in the study of a specific experience.

Respondents were asked a series of ten questions dealing with: 1) reasons for participation, 2) general impressions of team visit, 3) lessons learned about working with community members, 4) lessons learned about working with fellow team members, 5) assessment of the overall success, or lack thereof, of the team visit, 6) contributions to overall education, 7) lasting impressions on current work activity, as well as 8) civic activity, 9) recommendations for program improvement, and 10) general assessment of the utility of outreach programs in graduate education in public administration and local and community governance. As part of the interview methodology, respondents were provided copies of the interview protocol prior to the scheduled interview. This provided respondents the opportunity to review questions and prepare for the interview.

Given the small number of individuals interviewed for this project, this work is by nature exploratory. It may provide for a more comprehensive study of student participation in outreach and service learning programs in the future – especially those that are framed around the perspective of alumni who are able to reflect back on the experience months, if not years, after graduation. The author further acknowledges that the study may be limited by subject-observer interaction. All of the respondents were at one time students of the author. In addition, the author accompanied some, but not all, of the students on CDT visits, leading to a shared experience. Nonetheless, these findings can help shed light on the motive, assessments, and long-term effect of service learning activities.

The CDT as Service Learning in an Integrated and Reflective Curriculum

The West Virginia University MPA program embraces an ethic of applied and service learning. Applied class projects, community-based research projects, assistance to professors in outreach and service activities, and internships with local governments and community-based organizations are common experiences for students in MPA programs (Imperial et al. 2007),

and West Virginia University's program is no exception. In addition, since the late 1990s, the university's MPA students have been required to engage in both professional development and community service activities to complete requirements for graduation. These many different activities and opportunities for experiential and applied learning are integrated through two primary curriculum requirements – the learning portfolio and the capstone seminar. In this way, students pursue experiential learning, community engagement, and service learning across the curriculum.

Because of the portfolio and capstone requirements, student participation in the CDT satisfies two crucial aspects of service learning – integration and reflection. As an extensive literature describes, these dimensions allow for students to meaningfully incorporate community engagement and service with more traditional forms of instruction and theory based knowledge. It allows comparison between the theoretical and the applied; provides insight on how different knowledge bases and disciplines encounter, interpret and frame issues and contexts; and reminds students that real-world problems are often ambiguous and complex (Eyler 2002, Bringle and Hatcher 2002, Brescia et al. 2009).

By incorporating service learning across the curriculum, specific activities such as the CDT can be incorporated into the larger learning objectives of the student and the program. While a discrete experience not usually associated with a specific course, the CDT satisfies service learning nonetheless because of this framework. A curricular, rather than course-specific, approach to service learning has distinct advantages in allowing for broader coordination of activities, reinforcing the ethic of service learning and community engagement, and for opportunities for integration and reflection on experiential learning experiences. It should be acknowledged that graduate programs, especially in professional fields like public administration, may be better positioned than undergraduate programs to adopt a curricular approach to service learning. Such programs enjoy the discretion to design and integrate curriculum to program specific needs and are relatively autonomous when compared to undergraduate programs. From an evaluation standpoint, assessment of curricular based approaches provide an opportunity to extend the helpful research on service learning course experiences of which there is a rich and growing literature (see, for example, Lee 2009, Diener and Liese 2009).

Not all MPA students participate in the Community Design Team. Recognizing the busy schedules, obligations, and interests of students, participation in the CDT was not imposed or required of students. Part of this was an appreciation that participating on the CDT might take some out of their “comfort zone” with its requirements for team members to stay with host families, expectations of public speaking, and interaction with others outside of the class room setting. This practice is in accord with the view of some service learning advocates that student involvement be voluntary rather than required (Strand et al. 2003, pp. 144-145). As one respondent put it, “making it voluntary is important, because it is seen as a choice.” Those interviewed for this study noted that they participated in the CDT for numerous reasons, but all agreed that there were encouraged to do so by faculty members.

The Student Experience: Encountering Community

Most of the respondents recognized the communities that they visited as distinct and having their own identities. They also acknowledged that their own life experiences shaped perceptions. One alumni observed that although she was from a small city in West Virginia, she found the small town that she visited to be “comforting.” As she noted, the CDT allowed her to visit “a small little corner of West Virginia that I would never have seen otherwise.” Another considered one highway town that was experiencing growth as not “a small town as I would think of it in West Virginia,” while another alumni who was raised in a major metro area definitely considered it a small town. And while seeing differences, the respondents also recognized similarities. As one noted, “there are some things that are just universal,” as he recalled the apprehension that many local residents shared about what the future might hold for their community.

A defining characteristic of the CDT is that team members stay with host families during the visit. There are practical and philosophical reasons for doing this. On a practical level, many of the small communities that are visited lack hotel and other commercial lodgings. On a philosophical level, there is the strong belief that staying with local families will strengthen the bond between team members and community members, will provide for intrinsic insight on the community and its people, and will provide further opportunity to learn about the issues, needs and concerns of the community from hosts (Loveridge and Plein 2000). From a service learning perspective, this affords the student a more in-depth immersion in the community in which they are engaged. It further reinforces the difference of the learning experience beyond the campus.

With that said, the prospects of staying with a stranger may cause apprehension for some. The predictability and anonymity of a hotel stay is eliminated in a CDT visit. Instead, team members may find themselves staying with a family close to town or in an outlying rural area. In what sociologists call the negotiated order (Fine 1984) of the collective enterprise, an oral tradition has emerged in the CDT program focusing on the adventure and otherness of the visit. Part of the attraction of engagement and outreach is doing something different and out of the ordinary and in this regard the CDT has some appeal (Plein 2004). Stories of staying in rustic mountain cabins, of late nights knocking on the door of a house in which the residents did not realize that they were hosting visitors, staying with “eccentric characters,” and of cold mornings of waking up in houses with little heat and poor water systems give a certain sense of allure and uncertainty to the whole enterprise. Of course, these stories are based more on the exception than the rule. Thus with some trepidation, new team members may have mixed feelings about staying with a host family. As one respondent put it, “it was almost a deal breaker for me” but she decided to go on the visit anyway and recalls that:

I remember arriving and I was really nervous. I was hung up about the host family. [But] that first night they had a candle light vigil at the courthouse to welcome us. It was really

cool you immediately had your nervousness shed at the moment. The other CDT members were in the same boat, we felt welcomed."

One respondent recalled similar feelings and saying to herself that "I'm going to be staying in a stranger's home." Yet she also found the experience rewarding. Staying in the home of an elementary school teacher, she realized that, "It's a good way to see what a community sees." Her host took her to the elementary school where she taught and they also went to a Little League game. Another respondent recognized that staying with others allowed for conversations and information to be shared that might not occur in public and formal gatherings, thus enriching the knowledge base for the team's work. Yet another alumni noted that she was apprehensive about staying with a host family, but she noted that she imagined that the feelings ran both ways. Nonetheless, she bonded so closely to her host that she invited her to her wedding some months later. Thus, the reality is that team members are often housed with families where much common ground and familiarity is found.

Visiting a new place and staying with host families allowed CDT participants to encounter community in largely unfamiliar settings. Only two of the respondents had previously been in the towns they visited. For one, the community was his home town and he saw the CDT as an opportunity to make a contribution as a citizen. For the other respondent, he recounted that he had visited the community as a child on a family trip and that the return provided a new perspective on the town. Most of the students who participated were themselves from small towns or small cities in West Virginia. However, two of the respondents were raised in major metropolitan areas in the East and Midwest. The students were also from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, gender and life experience. They also encountered communities that were diverse – most that had seen hard-times but also others that were on the verge of, or already dealing with, the challenges of growth and economic expansion. However, there was great consistency in the responses about community. In general the comments were mixed with elements of admiration and concern.

Describing a small rural town in one of the poorest counties of the state, one respondent said that the visit was, "eye opening, I had not been there before – there was an absence of professionals," such as physicians and lawyers. "The biggest thing in the town was the grocery store," she continued. The town was in economic decline and there were few services. "I felt that the town was limiting" in terms of opportunities for children. "I got a sense that they did not want their kids to leave." She remembered that at one of the public meetings that a woman said that as they grew up that the kids were pressured to leave to find better paying jobs and careers. On this visit, the student was introduced to an endemic issue facing rural America and one of the greatest challenges of rural community development. The challenge of "youth flight" figures prominently in recent accounts of community development outreach (Proctor 2005) and has been recognized as a concern for decades (see, for example, Hoiberg 1955, Vidich and Bensman 1958). While a theoretical concern subject to much interpretation, the abstract is given sharp edge when a student or faculty member encounters emotional expressions of concern in a community meeting.

Recollections of the CDT Experience: “Ah-Ha” Moments and Lessons Learned

It is a tall order to ask someone to recall lessons learned from a weekend outreach project experienced years ago. Yet, a number of the respondents remember with great clarity certain CDT experiences. These “ah-ha” moments are watershed learning experiences where theory and practice combine to bring to light important and lasting lessons. It may be that a CDT visit is similar to “critical incident” experiences that have been described in the service learning literature that enhances reflection and memory for participants (Brescia et al. 2009). Such experiences often take place in circumstances where there is disagreement or ambiguity surrounding the definition of issues, problems, and solutions which serve to heighten efforts to compare and reconcile current experience with past learning (Eyler 2002, Brescia et al. 2009). Thus, exposure to unexpected events and the novelty of new or unforeseen experiences can leave strong impressions and be a source of reflection. In this regard, the Community Design Team provided a unique learning experience for the respondents who could recall specific incidents within the visit that they clearly remember.

A common response among the respondents was that the visit taught students to listen and observe. Perhaps most importantly they recognized that communities speak with “many voices.” As one respondent noted, it was important to tap into the “enlightened self-interests” of community members that differed, but complemented each other. This diversity of voice was captured well by one respondent who noted that, “you expect the community to be one entity, but it was not, subgroups had different ideas of what was important.” This same respondent noted how both he and another MPA student worked to make the citizen dialogue more inclusive during the CDT visit. As he recalls, they recognized that while they were benefitting from various perspectives from town officials and stakeholders they also realized that the voice of youth was missing. They knew that CDT practices called for youth participation. They brought this up with the team leaders and were given the task of organizing a listening session with local school children. From them, they learned about the lack of structured recreational activities and the need for more after school opportunities. These recommendations found their way into the final report delivered to the community.

One of the respondents recalled picking up on schisms in the community between those who wanted change and those resigned to the inevitable. As long identified in the social science literature, this dynamic among advocates of change and those who are willing to accept the status quo is often aligned along an axis of perceived “newcomers” and “natives.” The former are often perceived as agitating for change, while the latter are seen as resistant to new arrangements (Hoiberg 1955, Vidich and Bensman 1958, Proctor 2005). It is a dynamic that has been identified in the CDT experience as well – though the dimensions are more complex than a simple alignment between those who are new and those who are old to the community (Plein 2004, Plein and Morris 2005). As the alumni recalled of her visit to an economically distressed town, “You could tell people are frustrated. In small towns they might be resigned to

[the belief] that nothing is going to change.” But, she added that “sometimes you have a small group that wants change.” What follows might be a sense of “distrust for outsiders” and others who seek change.

Perhaps the most telling recollection was offered by a respondent who realized that information can privilege some interests and prejudice others. Information can be a prized commodity. It is not always distributed evenly across a community. Some seek to protect and withhold it from others. She learned this as a result of the team turning its attention away from one of the original foci of the visit – an old abandoned warehouse. There had been interest expressed in converting the warehouse into a farmers’ market or some other type of community center. However, during the visit some of the local elites told the team to steer clear of re-envisioning the site because it had just been sold. As the visit proceeded, it quickly became apparent that not everyone in the community knew about the sale. When the team presented its recommendations at the Saturday night town meeting, some in attendance were disappointed that no mention had been made of the building. She realized that holding back information had “back-fired” and had not served the team or the community well. As she mentioned, “this still effects me.”

Respondents reported learning much from interacting with local residents on the CDT visits. They also emphasized the lessons they gained from working in a multi-disciplinary team. Each commented how they realized that specialized knowledge brought a different perspective and interpretive lense in encountering community. “You learned about being open-minded – there will be different trains of thought,” remarked one respondent. Another noted that “when you walked down the street, people saw things from a different perspective.” One participant gained a lasting lesson from accompanying a traffic engineer on a tour of one of the visit’s communities: “He pointed out that all of their one way streets led out of town. He said that the solution was to lead people back into town. I think of this whenever I go to a small town.” One respondent noted, “your reality is not everyone else’s.”

And yet for the diversity of perspective, the past CDT team members noted that perspectives and viewpoints tended to cohere once descriptions of issues and recommendations for action were formulated for the team’s Saturday night presentation. In addition, they noted the benefit of a multi-disciplinary team in using different tools to express team interpretations and findings. Some respondents noted that while their “words” could bring forth ideas and link the different parts of the community design process, it was drawings and the pictures provided by the landscape designers and the civil engineers that truly brought to life the team’s observations and suggestions. These images, helped to focus attention and generate discussion among the residents.

Most respondents recall learning from faculty, professionals, and the other students on the team. As one respondent put it, “the more experienced members were interested in helping the students.” Many were fascinated by the skills and abilities of landscape designers and architects who could interpret an existing street scene into a re-envisioned image in just a few

minutes using velum paper and, with later visits, computer-assisted design software. As one put it, “I was blown away by the landscape architects.” Important lessons were also learned from other disciplines. Twelve years after a CDT visit, one respondent could still remember the impression that a geography professor made on him during the visit. The professor taught the student to look at a community from a different vantage point and to understand how it might be situated in a regional economy. In a similar vein, another participant commented that he learned to view communities in context of their surrounding watersheds because of those team members who were more experienced in land-use planning and environmental science. As he noted, “As public administration students we are generalists, we were able to learn about specifics” from others on the team.

Where Are They Now? Lasting Impressions and Advice to Others

Most of the respondents who participated in this survey have had subsequent career experience involving community development and citizen engagement. While some have moved on to new jobs, most remain in the field of community development and local governance. Among the respondents were a state legislative staff member, a city manager, an economic planner for a small city, and senior planner for a major metropolitan jurisdiction, a community-relations specialist who works frequently with small communities in the Appalachian coal fields, university-based research development specialists, a community organizer with a national advocacy group, an agent for a resort community, and an executive director of a non-profit organization that promotes volunteer projects in rural areas. Some respondents remain in West Virginia, while others have moved out of state. In recalling lasting lessons and impressions of the visit that they draw on in their work, four interrelated themes emerge. These involve group facilitation and interaction, governance in practice rather than theory, the diversity of community, and advice to others involved in the community outreach and design programs.

Some respondents cited facilitation skills learned in the CDT as springboards to their first jobs. As one alumni noted, not only was the CDT visit something she could put on her resume it also gave her the confidence to seek work in community relations. Another noted that the experience was useful when she started a job involving community-outreach in environmental remediation efforts. She noted that it helped her when she went into communities to facilitate often difficult meetings. From the CDT, she realized that broad and diverse participation is crucial to success. One alumni who now works in land-use planning credits the CDT, as well as other applied experiences in his MPA program, in preparing him for community meetings. As a result, “When I go into community meetings, which I do frequently, there is not that apprehension.” Reflecting on the CDT, he noted that, “It is so useful, that is why it has stayed with me. You can learn so much in the field. I would have loved to have done more.” Another student mentioned that CDT participation should be “a prerequisite” for those thinking about a career in public administration in rural communities.

A number of the respondents also pointed to lessons learned about the interaction of public, non-profit, and private organizations and actors in community development. This realization complements a broader paradigm shift now occurring in the study and practice of public administration which recognizes the importance of shared governance through networks of stakeholders and service providers (for a review, see Bingham and O'Leary 2008). One respondent noted that the CDT, "helped me understand how non-profits and local governments can work together." Another recognized the important role that small business owners play in the fate and future of community.

Some of those interviewed also mentioned that the CDT experience allowed an opportunity to see governing at work. This served as a useful complement to what was learned from books and in the class room. One alumni responded on how role influenced the way issues were presented by various officials and stakeholders in the various listening and meeting sessions organized for the CDT visit. Another came to appreciate the human side of locally-elected officials who acted professionally and competently in their roles but were also able to set aside position to interact with others. This was a "more personalized sense of government" than she had anticipated from her course study. She saw "all the hierarchy totally break down" when local officials interacted with residents.

In recounting lasting impressions from the CDT, an alumni who now facilitates volunteer outreach efforts cites two powerful lessons. The first involves "how you approach change in a rural community." He explained that you need to allow for the expression of the ideal, but that this must be followed by some consideration of what is feasible. Second, he realized that prior to the visit "I had not thought about how broad the term economic development was," adding that he learned to recognize that tourism, recreation and other activities are all part of this. Another respondent noted how the dynamic relationships among stakeholders and the relative importance of issues can create uncertainty and change. This is a lesson that he applies constantly. As he noted, "In my job now, we are constantly working with the community. There can be many different voices, we need to be flexible."

Through these experiences, those interviewed also noted that they had learned about the diversity of rural community – as well as some common features and challenges. One student, who served on visits to both poor and prosperous communities, had the advantage of comparison when reflecting on her experiences. She noted that in the more prosperous community, which was facing pressures from the encroachment of a major metropolitan area, the host organizing committee had very definite ideas of what they wanted their community to be – and that was a bastion against congested suburban and ex-urban sprawl. Rather than dealing with the decline of population or economic activity, the interest was in channeling and controlling growth. This was in stark contrast to the other community that she visited which was desperate for any economic activity.

Another student visited a community that had become a major crossroads town. While this small town had growing pains, its situation was enviable to other neighboring towns far from

the four lane highway. As she noted, “they had resources that others would dream about,” for these other towns “they could only dream about having a Wal-Mart.” While it is fashionable in design and planning circles to decry the presence of the Wal-Mart empire, for the respondent the presence of the store was an indicator of economic and market viability. At the same time she acknowledged that strip development could take business out of the old downtown core. And in doing in so, she realized that it was not enough to suggest that the remedy would be found in replacing these with a “centrally located coffee shop.”

While acknowledging the benefits of the CDT, the alumni were quick to offer feedback, constructive criticism, and advice for improving the program in specific and community engagement in general. While giving high marks to the CDT for encouraging broad-based community participation and collaboration, most of those interviewed mentioned that greater effort should always be focused on increasing the diversity of viewpoints offered by community members. One alumni expressed concern that in the community that she visited that the local host committee appeared weighted heavily in toward locally elected officials and administrators and their priorities. This tendency to slant participation toward one viewpoint was echoed in a different context by another respondent. In her visit, local participation was made up primarily of a citizens group that had apparently failed to get buy-in from local government representatives and officials. Thus, in both cases the full range of community interests and concerns appeared to be lacking.

The CDT visit creates waves in a community. Despite the best intentions of team efforts, the visits can be disruptive and have on more than one occasion created some controversy (Plein2004, Plein and Morris 2005). Some of the alumni recognized the effect that intervention can have. One respondent recalled that on seeing the stressed economic conditions in a once thriving town, that she recognized that some of the local citizens were defensive and sensitive to the judgment and suggestions of outsiders. She understood this, but realized that this could be detrimental. “When push came to shove, the residents did not want to hear certain things.” Her advice to others engaged in CDT and similar engagement activities – “be gentle.” Another respondent echoed and amplified this sentiment when he said, “you need to think about not being invaders.”

Another line of criticism focused on the composition of the teams themselves and some of the attitudes of those serving as team members. Many of those interviewed counseled the importance of “listening” and appreciating the “expertise” of local knowledge. One respondent thought that the team was too “Morgantown-centered” (i.e. university centered) and that some sense of elitism and superiority crept into some of the deliberations in presentations. As he noted, “In my work, we emphasize working *with* people, rather than *for* people.” He expressed concern that an attitude that the team was there to help and dispense munificence might be counterproductive. As he noted, “A sense of charity is not a terrible thing, but if one carries it into the experience people will pick up on that.”

Discussion and Conclusion

Because it is situated in an academic setting, the CDT program has become a vehicle for broader university engagement and to serve as a platform for service learning. The community experience, watershed learning moments, and lasting lessons explored in this study suggest the CDT has provided another structure for service learning and engagement – one that focuses on short-term engagement, multidisciplinary effort, community collaboration, and the application of student knowledge. These learning experiences are a positive consequence of the CDT program's broader intent to embrace an inclusive approach to community engagement.

Various scholars have emphasized the familiar and key components of service learning that include clear purposes, measurable results, faculty dedication, substantive student contribution, integration with curriculum, reflection, and assessment (Bingle and Hatcher 2002, D'Agostino 2008, Imperial et al. 2007). When it comes to student involvement, faculty investment, a sense of purpose, the CDT has clearly delivered. As a facilitative enterprise, the CDT provides measurable results in demonstrating community involvement and team efforts that are manifested through town meetings, presentations, reports, and in some circumstances follow up projects and activities. The team experience also contributes to the student learning goals – though not necessarily in a class or course specific manner which is often seen in other service learning contexts. In the West Virginia University MPA program, students have the opportunity for reflection and integration through a variety of means – the most important being a required capstone seminar and learning portfolio that is assembled by the student. For the respondents, the CDT experience figured in both of these venues. As one respondent put it, "I ended up doing my final capstone paper in the MPA program on the subject of teamwork because of this. My final paper was an outgrowth of the CDT." Another commented that the CDT was "an incredibly important practicum" and added, "If you are not putting the pieces together it's not a professional education. Without experience and practice, you only get a theoretical education."

It is generally recognized that a key component of meaningful service learning and student engagement is the capacity of the student to make substantive contributions in address a community-based need or initiative (Strand et al. 2003, p. 145). Those participating in the CDT were clearly able to make substantive contributions. Teams are assembled around issues that have been identified by the community. Team membership represents those students, faculty, and professionals who are able to address these issues from their various disciplinary perspectives. Graduate students have a substantial knowledge base to apply in the field. In addition, many bring to the experience other life and professional experiences that complement their contributions in community based research and engagement. The documentary record reveals a variety of activities that the students were involved in – including contributing to community level strength-weakness-opportunity-threats (SWOT) analyses, demographic and economic trend analysis and interpretation, community resource and social capital development ideas, and other activities. As one respondent noted of his experience,

“Even though we were students, we were put together [with faculty and professionals] and put to work. We were able to present the ideas that we wanted to put together.”

In the interviews, respondents were asked about the importance of service learning and outreach activities as part of their education. Each of the respondents now has enough distance from their graduate student days to offer perspective on the value of service learning and applied learning activities. In the interviews, there was uniform support for activities such as the CDT. A number of the respondents noted that the CDT allowed students to learn and apply skills in a supportive learning environment. “It was a real world application” of public administration principles in action noted one respondent. Another alumni said, “I truly feel like the CDT is actually a safe environment that allows you to experiment.” She added that, “I am a big proponent of experiential learning” and the CDT delivered in this regard. One respondent explained, “I do believe it’s excellent for MPA students. It is a real world example of local problems they will face when they graduate.” Another noted that, “It’s an invaluable experience, I am a big believer in service learning – it’s my vocation.”

The interviews also suggest that the CDT program helped to orient or reinforce student interest in pursuing careers in community development. As one alumni commented, “The MPA program gave me the guiding principles for my field, the CDT was able to invigorate this passion. Another commented that it provided “a frame of reference” by which to interpret public administration theory and practice. Just as important, without such experience, she noted that someone new to their job would “face a steep learning curve” when encountering communities and citizens. Another said that the CDT was a helpful complement to what is learned in the classroom or through required readings, from his viewpoint, the CDT was “another book” in his education. Looking back on the experience, the alumni noted that, “Absolutely, it was my favorite part of my graduate experience. I really got something from the CDT. I would recommend it to everyone. Another commented that, “I went for a weekend, and decided on a career.”

As these observations suggest, this present study offers another form of reflection on service learning experience. While the study’s intention was primarily to conduct an assessment and evaluation of an experiential learning experience through the Community Design Team, the very act of the interview – between a professor and a former student – marks another tool for reflection and integration. Those interviewed served on CDT visits in a time frame from 1998 to 2007. While two respondents had served on two teams, all the others served on just one visit. The recall of the respondents was remarkable. No doubt, having the interview schedule provided in advance served to prompt memory and interpretation. It is clear that the interview sessions also allowed for further reflection years after an experience which many identify as a watershed event in their graduate educations. This reflective component in the research process might serve as a guide for others to follow in developing reflection and assessment tools in service learning programs. While we all value the immediacy of a lesson, it is the lesson’s lasting impact that is most crucial to serving the purposes of education.

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