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Building a Better Orono Together: Cultivating Organic Community Connection with University and Orono Stakeholders Report Summary

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Project Summary

This project was undertaken as a collaboration between students in Professor Robert Glover's 2012-2013 "Engaged Policy Studies" course, Orono Town Planner Evan Richert, and Orono Town Manager Sophie Wilson. The objective was to examine the university and community perceptions of Orono as a "college town" with a focus on the Orono downtown area. We designed an online survey that was taken by over 800 total respondents (522 UMaine students, 110 UMaine faculty, 127 UMaine administrative and professional staff, and 93 community residents unaffiliated with the university).

They were asked questions about their satisfaction with Orono as a college town as well as knowledge of area opportunities, the importance of different dimensions of the community, the frequency with which they partake in certain activities, and overall feelings of connection to the community and the university. In addition, we conducted focus groups with town business-owners and University of Maine staff and administration. The study utilized a framework of "action research" which aims to integrate the community of study as a collaborative and active research *partner* rather than a passive research *subject.*

In addition, the study provides suggested "next steps" that the University and Orono might take together to address some of the most significant areas of need and dissatisfaction identified in the research.

Key Findings

At the most general level, we found that one's satisfaction varied significantly based on the demographic group of the respondent. University of Maine faculty were the most dissatisfied group, with just under 20% saying that they were satisfied or very satisfied. Among students, this percentage rises to nearly 40%, among administration and staff nearly 50%, and among residents unaffiliated with the university satisfaction is quite high at nearly 80%.

One of the most striking findings is that, for university stakeholders, satisfaction is significantly higher for those who are residents of Orono than those who are not (most markedly in the case of faculty where there is nearly a 20% difference in overall levels of satisfaction).

The survey also examined what was driving satisfaction or dissatisfaction, where the data suggested the following trends:

- There is geographic distance between UMaine and the downtown Orono area which translates into symbolic and communicative distance. These two entities are viewed as distant from each other in ways that are unique to Orono. University stakeholders view the community as detached from the campus, while community members view the campus as distant and uninviting. This has been, and will continue to be, the biggest challenge for university-community collaboration.

- Across the board, students, staff, and faculty who are residents of Orono are more satisfied with Orono as a college town than those who live outside of Orono. In addition, residents within these groups have a greater sense of connection to the community.

- Students do not view Orono as a place in which they would want to stay after they graduate (with over 80% saying they do not intend to do so). Students cite lack of job opportunities and the absence of a young professional social energy as the reason why they will not be staying. To a significant extent as well, younger faculty and staff are not settling in Orono, but choosing to reside in outlying areas. They cite the perceived lack of a vibrant, young professional culture as well as the absence of housing options other than single family homes for purchase and student-oriented rental housing.

- Respondents were asked to address which qualities they found to be most essential to a college town. Unsurprisingly, many ranked "outdoor recreation" (things such as trails and hiking, winter sports, canoeing and rafting, biking) as extremely important. Here, Orono performs remarkably with relatively high levels of satisfaction and frequency of use across all demographic groups (particularly among residents).

- Respondents feel that overall appearance is an essential part of a college town. However, satisfaction is quite low. Though most respondents feel that Orono is a friendly environment, they are dissatisfied with the lack of green space in the downtown, the presence of comfortable outdoor areas to congregate and socialize, lack of storefronts, and the overall condition of buildings and businesses in the downtown area.

- Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the existing artistic and cultural opportunities within Orono, as well as events and festivals that draw residents and university stakeholders into the downtown. Many suggested that the culturally-driven revival of Belfast (or even some of the things occurring more locally in Bangor) could serve as a model for Orono. In addition, many respondents wished that hubs of artistic and creative energy at the University could spill over into the downtown area.

- Lastly, across all demographics, respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that there is no "hangout" in the downtown area that is not a restaurant or a bar in the late afternoon/early evening hours. Students, residents, faculty, and staff alike do not spend nearly as much time in the downtown as they would because of a coffee shop or café in which they could do so. At present, respondents feel that they lack a place to socialize or work during these hours.

The surveys and focus groups were also telling in what they reveal with regard to university-community relations. While many respondents acknowledged past hostility or communication breakdowns, there is a sense of excitement right now about greater partnerships between the university and the community (as well as a general sense that Orono has grown and improved as a college town in the past several years). Nearly 80% of residents surveyed were interested in knowing more about university events and services and there is a clear sense of need (52% of residents expressed limited to no knowledge about university services, and 30% expressed limited to no knowledge about university events).

Next Steps

At the outset of planning this project in collaboration with the Town of Orono, the goal was not merely to produce a report, but also to think about "next steps" which the university and community could take together utilizing existing assets and resources, to address areas of dissatisfaction. In thinking about collaborative possibilities for the future, we highlight a few central areas of possibility.

- *Improved university-community communication*: Many of our suggestions are predicated upon the promise of greater communication between university and community stakeholders. Some of the most promising current developments have been driven by those who take the initiative and time to reach out to the community (or community partners who find a way to access a like-minded individual within the university). This will be essential moving forward—it's important that we foster and cultivate this ethos of engagement if the more ambitious steps below are to be feasible.

- *An Integrated University-Community Service Learning Partnership:* faculty and administrators at UMaine can work to harmonize the curriculum of classes at Maine with the needs of Orono and other local communities. Rather than studying community problems in the abstract, university courses could center their efforts on concrete needs or concerns of local communities. Such "service learning" approaches require little in the way of money; they do however require time, energy, and patience. Yet the rewards of such collaboration can be significant. Students gain practical experience and develop a sense of connection to the community; community partners gain resources and labor that they would otherwise lack. The University fulfills its mission as a land-grant institution and works to combat negative perceptions of distance and disconnect from the community.

- *Increased Artistic and Cultural Opportunities:* Throughout every demographic of our survey we found that the town of Orono is lacking in the category of "Artistic and Creative Expression." This notion is one that is very vague and open, so we turned to the text box data for an idea of what participants meant and wanted in the town. The idea of an "art gallery" and "amphitheater" are not short-term goals and are for the most part not feasible at this time. But a cheap and easy solution to this issue is the idea of "parklets," which could also provide more green space in the downtown area. A parklet is a small space, ranging in size from that of a parking space to that of several, that serves as an extension to the sidewalk in a town or city allowing for artistic and/or green space. It would be a relatively cheap solution to place these parklets at various places in downtown Orono for use by students and community members. An idea is to make the space available and accept proposals for the use of the space, thus allowing students, faculty, or residents utilize the space for their artwork, music, free speech, etc. for a specified period of time. On top of more individual artistic opportunities, it is important to improve on opportunities for the community at large. In order to do this, we recommend hosting more cultural and artistic events sponsored by the town or university at venues owned by both parties. Speeches, plays, and concerts put on by students or sponsored by the university can be hosted in venues such as Webster Park (during the warmer months) and utilizing the new St. Mary's Church space for indoor events.

- ***Blurring the Boundaries Between the Town and University:*** In the minds of many students at the university there is this perception of the downtown area as being too far away from campus to easily visit, especially on foot or by bike. In reality, though, the distance from the University Mall to Mill Street in downtown is only a little over one mile. This perception needs to be combated by both the university and the town in order to improve communication and the sense of connection; there are a few related measures would like to see implemented. An issue causing disconnect between community and town organizations and the university is the notion of the university as an "amorphous blob" for which it is difficult to find an access point. To this end, we recommend an institutionalization of a liaison role between the town and the University. Specifically, we see it potentially falling under the jurisdiction of the recently hired Associate Dean for Community Engagement, due to start in August of 2013

- ***University-Community Co-Branding:*** The town needs to improve its own branding to apply to its physical locations as well as extending that brand onto the University. Likewise, the university must work with the town and businesses to extend its branding out into the downtown area. This branding should range from logos in and around stores to Orono street and entrance signs. Essentially, the two need to collaborate in their image to make it seem as though both are a part of the same unit so that, as one moves from one to the other, it is fluid and the transition seems non-existent.

- ***Adaptive Business Models:*** The survey results suggested many potential areas for new business opportunities in the downtown area. These were a lack of an 18+ venue for students in the late afternoon and evening hours, a lack of anything besides busy restaurants open in these same hours, and a lack of a "coffee shop." The town of Orono is lacking a quiet indoor environment in which people can study, work, and socialize during the late afternoon and evening hours, and more specifically, the town is lacking any establishment in the evening and late evening that caters to those under 21 years old. This could be addressed by a non-franchise coffee shop being opened in the downtown area, either by a new business or an adaptation of an already existing business in the downtown. Another opportunity that all demographics show is a significant desire for a more permanent grocery establishment in the downtown area, whether it's a more permanent location for the farmer's market or a full grocery store. We recognize that this is a very expensive end, and requires extensive infrastructure and money that the downtown area does not currently have, but it is something to recognize and take steps towards. The use of existing resources to improve the farmer's market is a good initial step that we recommend.

Conclusion

As you can see from our suggestions thus far, we don't necessarily need to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on initiatives to revamp the downtown to improve its college town feel. Communication and reciprocity can enable the University and the Town to work together as a cohesive unit and to blur the boundaries between where one ends and the other begins. This will be an ongoing project, but it is one that is already well underway (and of which this collaborative course is an example). The more these two entities work to align their strategies and foster communication, the greater the benefit for all parties involved.