The Elkhorn City Project

A University-Community Partnership in Community Transition

Highlighting EKU University Student Involvement

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The Elkhorn City Project

Background: The small town of Elkhorn City has a current population base of approximately one thousand residents and lies in the heart of the eastern Kentucky coal fields in Pike County, KY. As with many mining towns across eastern Kentucky, coal mining no longer provides the economic boom or employment base that it once did for the community.

Many in Elkhorn City, as elsewhere in Appalachia, are talking about their town’s economic future as it transitions from a coal to a post-coal economy. Yet Elkhorn City is doing more than just talking. The Elkhorn City Heritage Council has been working towards developing an alternative economic development plan for the town’s future for nearly a decade.

Elkhorn City has some unique advantages over other coal mining communities as it begins its transition. It has spectacular natural assets that include the Breaks Interstate Park, which has been referred to as the “Grand Canyon of the South.” The Russell Fork River, which is already a river destination for world-class kayakers, the Pine Mountain Trail, the new Great Eastern Trail and the Trans America bike trail, are all prominent trail systems that also run through Elkhorn City.

Our Project: In May 2012, a group of faculty and students from Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) and University of Kentucky (UK) met with Elkhorn City Heritage Council members over a two day period to tour the town of Elkhorn City and recreational opportunities along the Russell Fork River. After this initial scoping trip, faculty and students returned to Elkhorn City to conduct formal interviews with Heritage Council members and other citizens regarding their views on the challenges and opportunities awaiting the region through its economic transition to a post-coal economy. At the start of 2014, area residents were surveys on their thought on their communities future and future prospects for economic and community development.

Some Project Milestones

University students collected, transcribed and analyzed 21 field interviews with Elkhorn City citizens on the challenges and opportunities facing tourism and community-economic transition

University students developed, pilot-tested and collected surveys door-to-door on the community economic development potentials and challenges facing Elkhorn City.

University students make the news and promote the project and Elkhorn City

University Student Research Team

Mary Phillips - “This project has provided me with so many opportunities as an undergraduate student. This project became my outlet to the professional field of scholarly research. Transferring my skills and experience from the university and applying them in the field was a whole other reality..... Most importantly, I felt that the balance of being involved in a community so close to home and being the researcher, was not only enriching to my academic career but satisfied my interest in Anthropology as a way of addressing social justice in the world.”

Mark Beaver - “This project is the first ‘real’ research development project I have ever had the opportunity to be a part of. It has taken my academic skills beyond the classroom and into the real world where I can continue to develop my skills and work on a real case study. This project has proven to be one of the greatest experiences of my life, for it has reinforced my desire to want to pursue some sort of research in graduate school. Furthermore, my involvement and field experience gained has allowed me to acquire new field skills. Some of these things could have been possible if I were not for this project.”

Dylan Bogard - “This project has allowed me to do research beyond anything I had ever imagined in undergrad. The work that I have done has helped me in deciding my graduate school path of a master’s in urban planning. I hope that the findings from this research can be used, and truly help in the development of Elkhorn City and the Appalachian region. The work that I have done has inspired me to work more in the Appalachian region, with hopes of one day working in the region permanently.”

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