

Addressing the Town–Gown Relationship Through Experiential Learning and Placemaking: A Case Study at a Private Liberal Arts College

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Abstract

This study explores the role of placemaking in strengthening campus–community relationships through a mixed–methods approach at the College of Wooster in Ohio, United States, incorporating interviews, surveys, fieldwork, and external observation. The research identifies seven key themes—hubs, communication, transportation and accessibility, recreation, collaboration, community–facing events, and safety—as fundamental to fostering engagement between the college and its surrounding community. To address identified challenges and opportunities, the study proposes four strategic approaches: eventalization, physical modification, place rebranding, and spatial extension. These strategies align with placemaking principles, emphasizing sociability, accessibility, comfort, and activity to transform the campus into a shared, integrated space. Using a participatory approach and the Applied Methods and Research Experience (AMRE) model, the research emphasizes collaboration and iterative refinement.

Keywords: placemaking, campus–community integration, spatial integration, experiential learning, undergraduate research



Since their inception, universities have navigated complex associations with the communities that host them. Town–gown relations could be uniquely susceptible to tensions sparked by an institution of higher education’s expansion plans, student disruption, or a significant population boom during the academic year (Harasta, 2022). However, studies also have found that a healthy partnership can provide students with a sense of belonging and also propel innovation in the community (Massey et al., 2014; Pancholi et al., 2020). Given the potential for a symbiotic relationship, scholars have turned their attention to universities’ community engagement efforts (Bhatt & Singh, 2023; Gavazzi, 2022; Suarez–Balcazar et al., 2004).

The City of Wooster, with an estimated population of 27,030 in July 2023, acts as the commercial, retail, and recreational center of a mostly rural county in northeast Ohio (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Featuring a thriving and diverse economic

sector, the city has been named a “top ten micropolitan” area twice in the past decade (Policom Corporation, 2024). The community is also home to a robust network of nonprofit organizations that attend to a broad range of community and civic needs, including the arts, transportation, housing, addiction and recovery programming, and employment training. In addition to the College of Wooster, the city has been home for over 130 years to a campus of the Ohio State University’s College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences, which hosts expansive graduate research programs and an associate–degree–granting unit. The city’s demographic makeup is less racially diverse than that of the College of Wooster’s student body, with 89% of the community’s population identifying as “White alone” (College of Wooster, 2024b; United States Census Bureau, 2022).

The College of Wooster is a small, residential liberal arts institution hosting 1,800 undergraduate students on 240 acres in the city

of Wooster, Ohio. Most Wooster students do not reside in Ohio, with 65% coming from outside the state. Twenty-seven percent are U.S. students of color; additionally, more than 85% of students receive financial aid, with 22% as Pell Grant recipients (College of Wooster, 2024b). Since its founding in 1866, the institution has been an integral part of the community. Alongside a diverse student body, the college provides several resources that are available to the public, including its art museum and libraries (College of Wooster, 2024a; Pill, 2017). The College of Wooster is also an economic asset, being named as a “major employer” by the county’s economic development entity (Wayne County Economic Development Council, 2024). However, challenges, including spatial constraints, communication issues, and incidents both on and around campus, have hindered the positive relationship between the college and the community, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summer 2023, the College of Wooster hired a research consulting team of four undergraduate students and two faculty advisors to identify ways to improve interactions on campus between members of the campus and city communities. Synthesizing these data with themes from the literature on town-gown relationships and placemaking, the team developed a novel roadmap to guide the college’s initiatives toward improved community engagement on campus. In this article, we discuss a unique approach to student research, the placemaking framework’s theoretical foundations, and how it could be applied to enhance college-community interactions. In other words, we use placemaking as an interpretive lens for this study, meaning we pay attention to how everyday users experience public space and what makes a place feel active, welcoming, and worth returning to. This project was commissioned by college administrators as the sole client. Although the study intentionally gathered resident and local partner perspectives, the recommendations are directed to the college as the primary actor with the authority and resources to initiate and sustain changes.

Town-Gown Relationship

Universities and their surrounding communities often develop complex relationships characterized by periods of tension and collaboration. Gavazzi (2022) used the metaphor of a marriage to describe the nature of this partnership, which involves sharing

space, resources, intentionality, and mutual beneficence. Measuring the dimensions of *effort* and *comfort* between the two parties, the town-gown partnership can be characterized in four different categories: *devitalized*, *conflicted*, *traditional*, and *harmonious*.

Conflicted examples have existed as early as medieval Europe, when universities attempted to protect their students against the “temptations of city life” by isolating themselves from the surrounding community (Brockliss, 2000, p. 165). Over time in the United States, however, off-campus housing expanded due to enrollment booms and universities’ insufficient infrastructure to house students (Rousmaniere, 2021). This development has consistently infused American neighborhoods with activity and revenue, but also potential disruption. Institutions and towns seeking the optimal harmonious relationship identify and establish programs that require significant effort and undergird high levels of comfort between the parties (Curme et al., 2022; Gavazzi, 2022). *Harmonious* relationships tend to have unique characteristics, including open communication and an environment where universities and communities can learn from each other to regularly seek balance in expectations and outcomes (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2004; Zvonkovic et al., 2025).

The College of Wooster’s existence is directly linked to local investment; it was underwritten in the mid-19th century by prominent Wooster citizens who answered the call from the Ohio Presbyterian Synods for a university in the region and donated the land and funds for initial construction (Wooster Digital History Project, 2024). Collaboration between townspeople and the college has evolved over 170 years based on changes at the college, the city, and global events of social upheaval, war, and economic crises (Footlick, 2015).

In 2023, an administrator within the College of Wooster’s Center for Diversity and Inclusion, now the Center for Belonging & Intercultural Dialogue, advocated for more engaging, positive interactions between members of the campus and city communities. Though the two parties (students and local community members) share a history of mutual dependence and camaraderie, this administrator noted several examples of a growing challenge, such as a decrease in student engagement off-campus since the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer local community members visiting open campus

spaces, and a rise in incidents of hostility between students and community members. The administrator decided to hire an AMRE (Applied Methods and Research Experience) team to research the issue and detail initiatives the college could undertake to promote more positive interactions between campus and community members. If interpreted using Gavazzi's (2022) terms from the "campus–community as marriage" model, this administrator was describing an assumed lack of intentionality in attending to what most campuses experience, which is a *traditional* "low effort and high comfort" relationship between the town and campus. In stating anxieties about such a relationship turning *devitalized* (low effort and low comfort) due to a lack of intentional action, the AMRE team quickly identified that a more *harmonious* relationship, or something of high effort and high comfort, in Gavazzi's terms, would be possible only if the underpinning of the research and the conclusions included community member value and participation. To ground these efforts in a spatial and community-centered perspective, the research team turned to placemaking as a theoretical framework, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of community perspectives and the development of actionable strategies.

Placemaking as a Guiding Concept and Process

Placemaking is a multifaceted and evolving concept that focuses on transforming spaces into meaningful places through collaborative and community-focused efforts. Although seemingly straightforward, placemaking has been approached from various disciplinary perspectives, resulting in diverse definitions and theoretical frameworks. Strydom et al. (2018) emphasized this diversity, systematically illustrating how placemaking has grown and adapted within the field of spatial planning and beyond. Drawing from disciplines such as urban design and urban planning, social sciences, arts, education, and design (Alvarez et al., 2017; Keidar et al., 2023; Lew, 2017; D. Thomas, 2016), placemaking addresses the interplay between physical spaces and their social, cultural, and economic dimensions. At its heart, placemaking involves reimagining spaces to enhance their functionality, identity, and emotional connection for the people who use them (Beza, 2016; Boeri, 2017; Breek et al., 2020). This process is inherently collaborative, engaging

individuals, groups, and organizations to envision and shape spaces that reflect their needs, values, and aspirations (Meetiyagoda et al., 2023; Montgomery, 2016). Activities such as renovation, maintenance, and creative redesign often form part of these efforts, which aim to cultivate spaces that feel unique (Eckenwiler, 2016). Uniqueness in this context is derived from site-specific characteristics like community-driven art, historical elements, and opportunities for social interaction, all of which contribute to a place's identity (Jarratt et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2015).

Historically, placemaking developed as a response to the negative effects of urban sprawl on community life. Pioneers such as Jane Jacobs and William Whyte played a critical role in shaping the concept's foundational principles. Jacobs's (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* demonstrated how small-scale, human-centered changes could breathe new life into urban neighborhoods by contributing to social connections and activity. Similarly, Whyte's (1989) studies on urban liveliness highlighted the importance of designing public spaces with human behavior in mind. These early contributions continue to influence contemporary placemaking, which prioritizes human connection and social engagement alongside physical design. Over time, placemaking has shifted from being a top-down process driven by experts and policymakers (Day, 1992; O'Brien, 1985) to a more inclusive, democratic approach. Today, it often involves collaboration among diverse beneficiaries, including community members, local authorities, and nongovernmental organizations (Bisani et al., 2022; Schneekloth & Shibley, 2000; Toolis, 2017). This participatory model reflects a growing recognition of the importance of diversity in shaping public spaces (Bilandzic & Johnson, 2013; Rios & Watkins, 2015; Vaughan et al., 2021). By engaging multiple perspectives, placemaking addresses social, environmental, and economic challenges while promoting sustainable development and social cohesion (Ellery et al., 2021).

Recent innovative ideas about placemaking, such as creative and tactical approaches, further emphasize its participatory nature. Creative placemaking integrates art into community development, using cultural practices to enrich the social and aesthetic value of spaces (Ellery et al., 2021; Matthews & Gadaloff, 2022). Tactical placemaking,

inspired by tactical urbanism, focuses on temporary, cost-effective interventions that allow communities to experiment with space usage before committing to permanent changes (Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Project for Public Spaces, 2013; Stagias & Mahmoud, 2024). These efforts often include movable furniture, planters, and other flexible elements to activate spaces and explore their potential for community engagement. Tactical placemaking is particularly relevant for redesigning campus environments. Its iterative nature—testing, observing, and refining—enables campuses to experiment with various approaches before implementing lasting changes. This flexibility is vital for enhancing campus–community interactions, as it allows institutions to adapt to the diverse and evolving needs of students, faculty, and local communities; therefore, campuses can create spaces that not only serve academic purposes but also build meaningful connections with their broader communities.

Different studies have highlighted the relevance of placemaking in college campus design and planning. Adhya (2010) discussed college towns as models for sustainable placemaking, demonstrating how campuses can play a key role in strengthening ties with their communities. Sahramaa (2013) examined how campus design influences a sense of community, proposing a framework for creating environments that support communication, integration, and lasting engagement. O'Rourke and Baldwin (2016) explored the impact of involving students in placemaking efforts, finding that participatory approaches enhance attachment to campus spaces. Ehlenz (2018) analyzed how university investments in surrounding neighborhoods led to meaningful changes, showing the potential for campuses to act as catalysts for local revitalization. Millington (2016) and Verdigué (2021) focused on the broader relationship between campuses and their urban contexts, emphasizing the role of universities in shaping the identity and development of their surrounding areas. Tichavakunda (2024) contributed to this discussion by introducing Black placemaking, offering insights into how marginalized groups redefine campus spaces to create a sense of belonging. These studies illustrate the growing focus on placemaking as a means to improve the quality of campus environments and strengthen connections with the wider community. Placemaking is becoming an increasingly relevant topic for colleges and universities seeking to enhance

both their internal spaces and their role within the urban fabric.

Experiential Learning Approaches

Applied Methods and Research Experience

The Applied Methods and Research Experience (AMRE) is a unique consulting program at the College of Wooster that pairs teams of undergraduate students with faculty and staff advisors to work in the summer on a project for a variety of businesses and organizations. In the 30 years since its inception, AMRE has worked with 74 different clients, ranging in size from Fortune 500 companies to local nonprofits. Over 500 students have participated, and they are now hired from nearly every major at the College of Wooster and partner school Ashesi University in Accra, Ghana. Currently, AMRE employs about 30 to 45 students per summer and seven to 12 advisors for 10 to 12 projects.

The student researchers work for 40 hours a week, 5 days a week, across 7 to 8 weeks in the early months of the summer. As compensation for their efforts, they receive an hourly wage that is competitive with other student summer internship wages. They also participate in professional development workshops, networking meetings, and social events—all intended to build intra-AMRE camaraderie and opportunities to hone professional skills. The students' deliverables to the client vary from developing a human resources website for a United Way chapter's partners to analyzing material flaws in the production of automotive parts. The projects always include a final written report, a presentation to partners, and a series of reflection artifacts that are collected and showcased by the directors of the AMRE program.

In 2024, clients paid \$17,000 for a two-student team and \$22,000 for a three- to four-student team. Nonprofit clients pay a significantly discounted rate that is subsidized by outside philanthropy and College of Wooster alumni. The college hosts the students participating in AMRE on campus, providing space, networking infrastructure, and the opportunity for students to live and eat on campus at a summer rate. Outside the College of Wooster hosting the program, AMRE is cost neutral, as it is based on endowed funds, client fees, and foundational support.

In summer 2023, a College of Wooster administrator proposed an AMRE project to research and recommend ways to improve campus–community interactions. The AMRE program directors invited two faculty members from Wooster—one housed in Urban Studies and the other in Education—to advise the AMRE team of four undergraduate students. Unlike most of the other projects that year, members of the College of Wooster community served as both the client (administrator) and the consultants (students and faculty).

Methodology

To gain context for possible placemaking projects, following a literature review the team carefully examined how other municipalities and organizations successfully implemented placemaking projects. Many of the proposals in the report to the college were inspired by these examples. The AMRE team conducted a mixed-methods approach to collect data informing the recommendations to the client by utilizing four methods: case study analysis, field observation, interviews with the college and community members, and a survey. Each method was used at varying stages of the project.

In addition to our case study analysis of the college and community of Wooster, the AMRE team conducted field observation through several walks around campus to pinpoint areas that could receive prioritized attention. Specifically, they focused on potential opportunity zones and hubs. To deepen understanding of how peer institutions address a town–gown relationship, the AMRE team visited another small college in the region. The team toured the campus to examine the spaces that engage the community and interviewed that institution’s director of student involvement to capture more context on ways that the institution approaches community engagement.

With the goal of incorporating perspectives from both the college and local partners, the AMRE team conducted interviews with 24 stakeholders: 17 College of Wooster employees, four City of Wooster employees, and three leaders of local community organizations. Every interviewed employee of the college was either a longtime community member or regularly interacted with the community as part of their job. The interviews were semistructured; therefore, the AMRE team prepared a set of predetermined open-ended questions to ask all

interviewees, and a set of specific questions tailored to the expertise of the individual respondent. Prior to each interview, the team explained the project and how their responses would be used to the interviewee. Team members took and then shared notes of each interview, building data that would be analyzed for emerging themes to inform recommendations. Interview notes were analyzed through coding: The team extracted recurring codes from the notes and then translated these codes into the themes presented in the Findings section.

With the goal of maximizing residents’ input, the AMRE team also conducted a survey of community members. The College of Wooster is a fully residential campus, so students were not part of the survey pool as local household residents. Prior to launching the survey, the team undertook several steps to ensure reliability. A draft online survey on ArcGIS123 was piloted with a small group of community members. Using feedback from the pilot, the team adjusted the survey. With Canva software, they designed flyers providing a QR code and an online link to the survey, which displayed the research team’s contact information. The team utilized ArcGIS to identify several residential blocks and residences surrounding the college and distributed surveys to over 400 units in the selected blocks. Approximately two weeks after the survey’s initial distribution, the team made it available to the broader community by posting a link on a Wooster community Facebook page. The team chose to follow this course to receive more responses from community members, eventually leading to 79 total participants answering the survey. Because this survey targeted local residents rather than college-affiliated respondents, the quantitative data in this study primarily reflects community perspectives on the campus–community relationship. Survey data (residents only) were analyzed descriptively (frequencies/percentages). The qualitative and quantitative results were integrated through triangulation by comparing survey patterns with interview-derived themes and using areas of alignment to refine and prioritize the final set of themes reported.

Findings

Key Themes

From the analysis of interviews with participants and surveys conducted within the

community, seven key themes emerged as aspirations for strengthening the relationship between the college and the broader community. These themes reflect shared priorities, challenges, and opportunities for fostering meaningful connections and enhancing the campus–community dynamic and include the need for (1) hubs, (2) communication, (3) transportation and accessibility, (4) recreation, (5) collaboration, (6) community-facing events, and (7) safety.

Hubs

A recurring theme in the responses was the need for central, accessible spaces on campus to serve as gathering points for both college and community members. These hubs were envisioned as spaces that facilitate social interactions, provide resources, and serve as informational centers. Respondents emphasized that such spaces, especially with regard to exterior design and landscaping, could act as bridges between the campus and the community, enhancing a sense of inclusion and shared purpose. Whether through existing structures or new developments, creating vibrant, multifunctional hubs was seen as crucial for enhancing interactions and breaking down barriers between the college and its surrounding community.

Communication

Effective communication was highlighted as a cornerstone for improving campus–community relationships. Many respondents expressed a desire for more diverse communication strategies to ensure that all community members were informed about opportunities and events on campus. The research team asked respondents about various programs and events happening on campus, and many had not heard of such events through existing informal channels. Suggestions from the respondents included distributing flyers, creating newsletters, and establishing a dedicated community page on the college's website. These methods aim to address information gaps and create a more transparent and inviting atmosphere for collaboration and participation.

Transportation and Accessibility

Transportation and accessibility were identified as critical factors for fostering stronger campus–community interactions. Respondents emphasized the need to enhance transportation options for students, such as implementing shuttle services with more effective schedules or

introducing bike-sharing programs. This theme emerged due to several challenges: the current shuttle schedule was perceived as inadequate, no functional transportation systems like bike-sharing existed, and the distance between the campus and downtown could be difficult to navigate, particularly during colder seasons.

Recreation

The importance of recreational opportunities as a means of enhancing engagement emerged as another key theme. Respondents highlighted the value of events, activities, and designated recreational spaces as informal yet meaningful platforms for interaction. From organizing sports events to developing accessible green spaces, recreation can serve as a powerful tool for community-building. These efforts could be particularly impactful if recreational spaces were strategically located at campus edges or accessible via the main road that bisects the campus.

Collaboration

The theme of collaboration centered on the college's role in supporting students' involvement in the community through volunteerism, internships, and work opportunities. Respondents underscored the value of partnerships between the college and local organizations, which could facilitate student participation in community projects, events, and initiatives. Increased visibility and presence of students in the broader community were also seen as essential for fostering mutual understanding and cooperation.

Community-Facing Events

The desire for community-friendly events hosted by the college also emerged as a significant theme. Respondents expressed interest in events that would be welcoming and accessible to a diverse audience, allowing community members to feel included and valued. Such events could serve as important platforms for interaction, showcasing the college's commitment to building a stronger relationship with its neighbors.

Safety

Finally, safety was a prominent concern, particularly in relation to students' comfort when engaging with the community. Respondents highlighted the need to address perceptions of safety and ensure that off-campus interactions are positive and secure.

Strategies

The findings also informed the development of four strategic approaches designed to address the identified themes and serve as a foundation for actionable recommendations. The strategies include (1) eventalization, (2) physical modification, (3) place rebranding, and (4) spatial extension. They combine principles of placemaking with the unique opportunities and challenges identified through the research.

Eventalization

The concept of eventalization, derived from the words “event” and “revitalization” (Pløger, 2010; Richards, 2017), emphasizes organizing events with the explicit aim of fostering positive interactions between college and community members. This approach is not about commodifying events but about leveraging them as tools for connection and empowerment. Two primary directions underpin eventalization. First, the institution can evaluate and adapt existing events to make them more engaging and inclusive for the community. Second, based on case studies and research findings, new events can be proposed to encourage interaction and sociability. For example, hosting cultural festivals or community fairs on campus can create opportunities for meaningful engagement and mutual appreciation.

Physical Modification

Physical modification focuses on making tangible changes to the campus’s physical environment to improve functionality, comfort, and accessibility. This strategy aims to transform campus spaces into more inviting and navigable areas that support social interaction and enhance the overall experience for both college and community members. Key initiatives under this approach include redesigning main activity nodes to improve connectivity and pedestrian accessibility. For instance, creating clear pathways, improving lighting, and adding seating areas can make spaces more user-friendly. Furthermore, aesthetic enhancements such as landscaping and public art installations can contribute to the campus’s visual appeal and identity.

Place Rebranding

Place rebranding focuses on reshaping perceptions of campus spaces and initiatives through strategic communication and marketing efforts. This approach seeks to

redefine the college as a community hub and increase awareness of its contributions to the broader community. Initiatives under place rebranding include creating clear and consistent messaging about campus events and opportunities, both online and offline. Developing a strong and welcoming identity for campus spaces can help attract a diverse group of community members and encourage their participation. Using digital platforms like social media and dedicated webpages can enhance outreach efforts and make information more accessible, and by promoting the college as an open and inclusive space, this strategy supports themes such as hubs, communication, collaboration, and community-facing events.

Spatial Extension

The final strategic approach, spatial extension, emphasizes connecting the college with off-campus spaces and encouraging interactions in the broader community. This strategy involves both physical changes and programs aimed at expanding the college’s reach and fostering engagement beyond its boundaries. Spatial extension initiatives include improving transportation options to make off-campus areas more accessible, such as providing shuttles to downtown or creating partnerships with local businesses. Additionally, encouraging students to participate in community events, volunteer opportunities, and internships can deepen their connections with the local community.

Discussion

This study underscores the powerful potential of placemaking as a transformative framework for redefining campus–community relationships. By adopting strategies such as eventalization, physical modification, place rebranding, and spatial extension, campuses can evolve into vibrant, collaborative environments that foster meaningful connections and shared growth. These approaches not only address immediate challenges but also lay the groundwork for sustainable partnerships and inclusive engagement. We wish to reiterate that placemaking is not a separate theory section here; it is simply the language we use to interpret what participants described. In that spirit, the themes below connect directly to basic placemaking ideas about comfort, access, activities, and the social life of public space, and to the practical question of what helps a space feel easy to enter, easy to use, and worth staying in.

Eventalization is one example of placemaking's focus on cultivating sociability and connection. Initiatives like a campus farmers market, concerts featuring both student and community artists, and a composting day are more than just events—they are intentional opportunities to bring people together in shared, low-barrier settings. These shared experiences dissolve the boundaries between campus life and the surrounding community, creating spaces for mutual understanding and collective joy. Eventalization transforms the campus into a place where stories are shared, identities are intertwined, and cultural bridges are built and maintained through “win-win” opportunities for increased social interaction and communication (Gavazzi, 2022). It's about turning fleeting moments into enduring bonds that enrich both the campus and the larger community, especially when the programming is regular and predictable, not one-off.

Physical modification takes placemaking to a tangible level by shaping the everyday feel and function of the space, turning the campus into a set of public places that support both passing through and staying. Projects such as codesigned public art installations and community gardens go beyond enhancing aesthetics; they become invitations to dialogue and collaboration. These spaces encourage a sense of shared belonging, where students, campus employees, and community members can come together to create, reflect, and connect. Such interventions symbolize more than physical improvements; they represent a commitment to openness and a shared ownership of the campus environment, and they work best when paired with the basics: seating, lighting, clear paths, and ongoing care.

Place rebranding focuses on reshaping how the campus is perceived, transforming it into a symbol of opportunity and inclusion. Initiatives like summer academic and music camps reimagine the college as more than just an academic institution—it becomes a welcoming hub of discovery, creativity, and engagement. By amplifying this vision through strategic communication—via social media, targeted outreach, and partnerships—the campus's role as an accessible, inclusive space can be redefined. This is not just about branding; it's about creating a culture where the campus is seen as a vibrant resource that is open and inviting to all, and where people can easily find what is

happening, where to go, and what is open to them.

Spatial extension emphasizes the importance of breaking down physical and psychological barriers between the campus and its surrounding community. Partnerships with local institutions like the local theater and improved transportation options demonstrate how campuses can integrate themselves into the broader cultural and social fabric of their towns and cities. These initiatives foster a sense of shared identity, connecting the campus to the community in ways that are both practical and deeply symbolic. It's a reminder that campuses should not exist in isolation—they should act as gateways to collaboration and mutual enrichment, with better linkages, clearer entrances, and fewer “invisible” boundaries that signal who belongs.

Frameworks that turn campus “edge/wedge” issues (Gavazzi, 2022) into opportunities for positive connection require mutuality and shared planning by champions or “boundary spanners” on campus and in the local community (Zvonkovic et al., 2025). These joint pursuits necessitate not only engaged people, but ongoing research, data collection and analysis, infrastructure, and avoidance of just “solving a problem” (Curme et al., 2022). Such collaborations require those invested to commit to core responsibility and pour effort into making the increased levels of contact more comfortable and harmonious (Gavazzi, 2022). The strategies outlined here illustrate the profound potential of the placemaking principles sociability, comfort, accessibility, and activity to inspire innovation and inclusivity, while also pointing to something simple: People participate when places are welcoming, legible, and convenient. Placemaking reframes the campus not as an isolated enclave but as a dynamic, interconnected ecosystem where students, college employees, and local residents come together to cocreate a shared sense of purpose and belonging. It shifts the narrative from one of mere coexistence to one of active collaboration and harmony, turning campuses into spaces of integration and opportunity, supported by ongoing stewardship rather than a single project.

For the College of Wooster, this vision comes to life through initiatives that transcend traditional academic-community divides. Such initiatives are bridges that connect people through shared goals and values.

Similarly, physical interventions like public art and community gardens transform the campus into a space where collaboration becomes tangible and meaningful, whereas rebranding initiatives redefine the college as a place of possibility, inclusion, and engagement. What sets placemaking apart is its inherent flexibility. It is an iterative process, one that thrives on experimentation, feedback, and refinement, including small adjustments based on what people actually do in the space. This adaptability allows campuses to respond creatively to evolving community needs, turning potential points of tension into opportunities for growth and collaboration. Placemaking is not a rigid framework; it is a dynamic and resilient approach to fostering connection and addressing change. By embracing placemaking, colleges have the opportunity to become beacons of integration—spaces where students and local residents come together to cocreate thriving, inclusive environments that reflect the strengths and aspirations of both worlds, with a clear plan for who maintains, coordinates, and sustains the work over time. Placemaking is not just about transforming campuses; it's about redefining how institutions engage with their communities, paving the way for a future of shared progress and collective impact.

Conclusion

This study addresses the transformative possibilities that placemaking holds for stronger campus–community relations. Through a mixed–methods approach, which included case study analysis, interviews, surveys, and field observation, the research uncovered seven themes—hubs, communication, transportation and accessibility, recreation, collaboration, community–facing events, and safety—that are essential for deepening engagement between the college and the surrounding community. Such themes foreground both the barriers to connection and the possibility of meaningful collaboration, and they show that engagement grows when the campus feels welcoming, easy to navigate, and clearly open to residents.

In short, the study offered four strategic approaches through which the college can respond to these findings: eventalization, physical modification, place rebranding, and spatial extension. These strategies

echo placemaking principles by prioritizing sociability, accessibility, comfort, and activity, and they help support the campus as an integrated, shared space. Events are points of contact for engagement, physical modification can improve everyday usability and comfort, rebranding allows the college's role in the community to be viewed through a wider lens, and spatial extension reinforces that connection does not stop at the campus edge. Across all four approaches, the key is consistency and follow-through, not one-time effort.

The research process itself translated placemaking principles into practice through an integrated and participatory approach beyond the recommendations. Instead of top-down solutions, the team embedded itself with community members, making them partners in diagnosing problems and shaping innovations. Returning to participants with refined ideas, and showing how their input shaped the direction, was part of the work, not an extra step. This kind of reciprocity aligns with Gavazzi (2022) and the shift from passive acknowledgment to active collaboration.

This research was made possible through the AMRE model, which supported time-intensive engagement, iteration, and adaptability. The AMRE team spent 40 hours a week over 7.5 weeks using rapid analysis and refinement, frequent site visits, and real-time feedback loops with community members to propel their efforts on one project. This pace and proximity helped keep the recommendations grounded in what people actually experience in the campus spaces.

In the end, intentionality, commitment, and the continuous willingness to grow and respond to change are foundational to cultivating strong campus–community relationships. These strategies offer practical, actionable steps toward a more inclusive, integrated, and mutually beneficial partnership between the college and local community. If the college treats placemaking as ongoing stewardship, with clear responsibility for coordination and upkeep, the campus can become a shared civic resource rather than a separate institutional world. This study acts as both a model and a call to action, reaffirming that the campus is not simply an adventure in spectating, but a dynamic organism thriving on engagement, interaction, and a collective reimaging of its role in the broader community.



Author Note

Thomas Pitney at time of research was a student and has since graduated from the College of Wooster.

We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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