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Place, Purpose, and Role in Rural Community Development Outreach: Lessons from the West Virginia Community Design Team

Christopher Plein

Abstract

This essay examines how the social construction of community may influence faculty perceptions, roles, and actions in rural community development outreach. Special attention is given to the social construction of rural communities and how disciplinary perspective and popular culture influence these perceptions of community. The essay considers how social constructions are manifested in community development outreach by reflecting on the relevant literature, and the author's own experiences with a long-term university-sponsored outreach program. The essay also considers how these issues related to social construction can be addressed through principle and practice as illustrated through the experiences of the West Virginia Community Design Team. Five suggestions regarding faculty roles in rural community development outreach are presented.

Introduction

In recent years, the role of higher education in providing community development assistance through outreach and engagement has garnered significant attention. Outreach in this context proceeds from the assumption that many communities lack the resources and capacity to address complex issues associated with their changing demographic profile and economic conditions. Colleges and universities often have the resources and capacity to lend assistance to these communities through rural community development outreach, which in turn provides important opportunities for the college or university. Community development outreach provides opportunities to practice applied research and learning by means of service-learning programs, community outreach centers, technical assistance programs, public service units, and other community-based research initiatives *(Bensen & Harkavy, 2000; Cox, 2000; Kensen, 2003; Loveridge, 2002; McDowell, 2001; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003)*.

This essay examines how faculty members perceive their roles in implementing community development outreach, and how they frame or interpret those places in which they carry out their efforts, especially when conducted in the rural context. It does so by using

the West Virginia Community Design Team to provide illustrations of some of these themes in application. The essay examines how framing or defining a place and its people is often a contested process of social construction. It also emphasizes that regions that have been subject to popular culture interpretation and stereotyping can present compounded problems of preconception and bias among those engaged in rural community development outreach. The issue of identity and role in community development outreach is then explored. Finally, the essay provides five points to consider in understanding role and perception in community outreach.

Setting the Context: The West Virginia Community Design Team

Established in 1997, the West Virginia Community Design Team (CDT) illustrates a coordinated university response to perceived community needs. Deeply inspired by a similar program established in the late 1980s called the Minnesota Design Team *(Mehrhoff, 1999)*, the mission of the West Virginia Community Design Team is to assist small West Virginia communities as they identify and think through development challenges and opportunities. This is accomplished by having a team of faculty members, students, and professionals travel to a small West Virginia community for a two-day visit. The team relies on a broad range of disciplinary and professional interests, ranging from landscape architecture, to civil engineering, to health sciences, to social work, to public administration, to community development *(Plein, 2003)*. By 2010, 42 Community Design Team visits had been conducted since program inception. Most of the visits have been conducted in rural areas of the state.

The typical Community Design Team visit includes an appraisal of the local political and civic climate, a review of economic and community development options, a survey of streetscapes and building design, and an inventory of community assets and resources. The first day of the visit is dedicated to information gathering and includes community tours, presentations by community groups and organizations, and a town meeting that is structured to solicit citizen input and discussion. The second day of the visit is dedicated to team discussion and development of plans, strategies, and actions that the community might consider. The visit ends with a town meeting where team observations and findings are offered. Team recommendations focus on the immediate and tangible, such as designs offered for landscape beautification, traffic safety, building restoration, or historic preservation. They also

focus on more long-term, amorphous objectives (e.g., economic development strategies and building civic capacity). After the visit, a detailed written report is provided. Team members frequently make themselves available for follow-up efforts *(Plein & Morris, 2005)*.

The West Virginia Community Design Team has been a work in progress for over 13 years, and has grappled with a number of issues in program design and implementation *(Loveridge & Plein, 2000; Plein & Morris, 2005)*. To address challenges, the Community Design Team has engaged in regular review and reflection through the use of follow-up visits to communities, through planning retreats for the program, and through regular meetings of the steering committee. Such activity has led to refinements in the structure of Community Design Team visit formats, an increase of multidisciplinary participation, and a greater emphasis on identifying follow-up activities for continued university-community outreach. Most important, the Community Design Team leaders have learned that the Community Design Team program's success depends on meaningful interaction with community members. To enhance interaction, the Community Design Team program leaders have adopted and refined various approaches to encourage broad and substantive participation by local residents that allows multiple definitions of "community" to be expressed. The Community Design Team program has learned that a rich and diverse base of community definition and interpretation allows more effective rural community development outreach. Establishing an appreciation for differing meanings or framings of community helps to facilitate collaboration by allowing different points of view to be acknowledged. It also helps to promote the consideration of alternative strategies and approaches to community development since actions need not be tied to one predominant vision of the community's current or past identity. An appreciation of multiple meanings of community also serves to remind participating faculty members how their own assumptions and preconceptions about a community need to be taken into account when participating in an outreach and engagement effort.

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In essence, the Community Design Team serves a catalytic function for university-community development outreach. The Design Team format brings together community and university members for a short period of time to identify community problems and opportunities, and then engages the group in a collaborative visioning exercise. The process also introduces community members to resources for follow-up activities that may have been overlooked locally or are available beyond the community in the form of state and federal programs, university services, and foundation or philanthropic resources. The team visit can also reinforce existing community networks and collaboration by providing a space for community members to gather and to reaffirm their commitment to shared planning and development efforts. Finally, the Community Design Team model provides an opportunity to introduce faculty members to rural community development outreach.

Rural Community Development Outreach: Measuring Impact

The Community Design Team model is one type of university-community development outreach *(Procter, 2005; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003)*. To measure its impact, the West Virginia Community Design Team program has been subject to considerable academic analysis and review. Much of the analysis has documented the program's evolution, and its application to specific elements of community development ranging from downtown revitalization, to community planning, to civic engagement, to health care service improvement, to disaster relief *(Plein, 2003; Plein & Morris, 2005; Shannon, 2003)*. Evaluative work has included the study of early program experiences and the adjustments made to better match Community Design Team member and community member expectations *(Loveridge & Plein, 2000)*, as well interpreting the barriers and opportunities for faculty participation on team visits *(Loveridge, 2002)*.

Other analyses have focused on community member and Community Design Team experiences. For example, surveys have been administered to gauge perceptions during or immediately after visits *(Stead, 1998; Walsh and Schaeffer, 2009)*. One study focused on long-term impact by interviewing student alumni 3 to 12 years after their service on a team visit *(Plein, 2010)*. There is still work to be done in evaluating the influence of a Community Design Team visit on follow-up activities undertaken by the communities served.

Rural Community Development Outreach: Faculty Perceptions of Community

The focus of this essay is less on the efficacy of the Community Design Team program and more on illustrating how Community Design Team faculty member participants perceive the places they encounter, and the roles they play in rural community development outreach. The use of the West Virginia Community Design Team as a basis of illustration draws from the author's years of observation and participation in the program. Such an analytical approach has gained validity as a means of inquiry—especially in the study of communities, organizations, and professions *(Balfour & Mesaros, 1994; Kensen, 2003)*; of faculty roles in higher education and society *(Hall, 2007)*; and of university outreach and engagement *(Diener & Liese, 2009; Domahidy, 2003; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003)*.

Rural Community Development Outreach: Construction of Place

Community is an elusive concept. Literature on the topic suggests that "community" can be framed in at least three dimensions: 1) community can be envisioned as a sense of place, 2) community can be perceived as a sense of personal identity, and 3) community can be conceptualized as a set of preferred behaviors and associations among those making up the community in which interaction exists or is desired *(Eberly, 2004; Gusfield, 1975; Mehrhoff, 1999; Mitchell, 2002; Phillips, 2002)*. These framings tend to be conceptualized temporally, and concentrate on the effects of perceived change on place, personal identity, and social interaction. Gusfield *(1975)* notes that a driving concern in the study of community is the impact of social change. Mehrhoff *(1999)* suggests that community "is a complex phenomenon possessing multiple meanings" best understood in context of how perceived changes are registered by citizens, specialists, and other observers *(p. xv)*.

The subject of community has more recently been taken up through the postmodern perspective that spans disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Building on earlier ideas of social construction *(Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1971)*, postmodern sensitivity can help the observer appreciate how one's frames of reference influence the interpretation of that which they study. Kensen, Sundgaard, Flessen, Musso, & Sehested *(2003)* convey that "postmodern discourse assumes that the world is communicated into existence" *(p. 327)*. Thus, the defining characteristics of community—its sense of place, the identities of its inhabitants, and

the expectations of behavior and practice—can be constructed in a variety of ways by different actors. It is not surprising that this perspective has been applied to ethnographic explorations of community *(Foster, 1993; Mitchell, 2002; Phillips, 2002; Stewart, 1996)*, and to reflections of the participant-observer in academic engagement activities *(Kensen et al., 2003; Banks et al., 1993; Procter, 2005)*.

Understanding the factors and forces that can influence faculty perceptions is an important starting point for understanding how community is constructed in higher education outreach and engagement. For many academics, their disciplinary training may provide a set of preferred visions and concepts of community, which may not mesh with the interests of the community members who are to be "engaged." For example, those in the planning field have long struggled with professional planners' preconceptions *(Whyte, 1968)*. Domahidy *(2003)* notes that strong adherence to theory among community development professionals allows them to "unconsciously come to hold an idealized vision of the community against which they assess the present and immediate community" *(p. 77)*. Such a disciplinary perspective may be in the foreground of interpretation and practice. Against this, there is a more nebulous backdrop of perception and impression that is created by images encountered through social norms and popular culture. These, too, can have a powerful influence on the manner in which community is constructed by the faculty member engaged in outreach *(Mehrhoff, 1999)*. Together, these forces can reinforce each other and create barriers to a faculty member's full appreciation for the specific places and people that are the concern of rural community development outreach.

The Concept of Rurality

The concept of rurality can be evocative. Long celebrated as genuine and authentic, rural communities have been idealized and romanticized as a pure type of community—self-sufficient, friendly, and civically engaged. This description has been accepted both in popular culture and in academic circles. For example, Bradshaw *(2008)* notes, "Place communities such as rural small towns are typically heralded as model communities where social cohesion rules—strong patterns of social interaction based on long-lasting and deep personal relations" *(p. 6)*. Rural communities are also perceived to be at risk, threatened by the forces of progress, modernization, and technology as well as by the economy. This depiction is nothing new, for the rural community has been said to be in crisis for some time. In the 1800s, social theorists began

to document, explain, and ponder the implications of the shift from traditional agrarian communities to market-driven urban communities *(Gusfield, 1975)*. Throughout much of the 20th century, the causes and effects of rural community decline continued to be a source of academic interest *(Hoiberg, 1955; Lancaster, 1952; Morgan, 1942; Vidich and Bensman, 1958)*. Underlying these studies was the assumption of a "loss of community," or at least a threat to a traditionalistic construction of community. Gusfield *(1975)* describes this as "a litany of pathos in the descriptive accounts of the past and present as often presented in contemporary sociological writings" *(p. 20)*. This sentiment is expressed by many who lament the passing of "community" *(Berry, 1977; Perry, 2002)*. While much effort is given to documenting the end of the past, there is also a strong urge to retrofit the small community into modern society. Embracing an idealized vision of community and accepting the premise that such entities are at risk may create biases in the manner in which faculty engage and work with communities. This can be mitigated by adopting collaborative practices that more fully involve local residents in community development and design outreach efforts. It can also be tempered by encouraging teams to be multidisciplinary in their makeup.

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Faculty perceptions of rural communities can be constructed from sources beyond disciplinary orientation. As Gusfield *(1975)* notes, the romantic currents are strong among many social theorists who have "accentuated and maintained the myth of lost paradise, a *gemeinshaftliche* Utopia which we have lost in creating a world of rational organization, economic exchange, and specialized functions. The dichotomy of 'community and society' is accepted, to the decided derogation of Society" *(p. 90)*. The pull of place, even if imagined, can be strong. Nonetheless, Mehrhoff *(1999)* notes, "Nostalgia, however, is not a particularly effective form of social analysis" *(p. x)*. There may be a desire to impose a romantic vision on the small, rural community that is rooted in the pastoral. In the search for a new Arcadia, academics may overlook the needs

and concerns of those that they are hoping to engage and assist. In university-sponsored rural community development outreach it is crucial to acknowledge such predispositions, and the challenges involved in converting what might best be called "passion for place" into productive action that can assist communities on their own terms.

Disciplinary orientation combined with the acceptance of popular images and portrayals of place and people can set the context by which faculty members encounter a community and its residents. U.S. popular culture is rich with shorthand sketches and characterizations of regions and their inhabitants that are more the product of generalization and stereotype than of empirical study and reasoned analysis. Stereotyping of a place or region can compound faculty misconceptions about it. Portrayals of the Appalachian region provide a good case in point. The images of Appalachia are powerful. It has been portrayed as distinct from the rest of the country *(Banks et al., 1993; Foster, 1993; Griffin & Thompson, 2002; Shapiro, 1978; Stewart, 1996; Williams, 2002)*. The stereotype of rural communities is of once self-sufficient communities overtaken by the forces of modernization and industrialization, now left as castoffs in modern society *(Foster, 1993)*. The once vibrant mines, railroads, timbering operations, and factories are now largely gone, leaving a portrait of a postindustrial landscape of scarred mountains, closed storefronts, dilapidated housing, and chronic unemployment *(Stewart, 1996; Williams, 2002)*. As a result, Appalachia is portrayed as a region in crisis.

For over 40 years, this image has been reinforced through mass media. For example, images of poverty and distress were popularized decades ago in such periodicals as the Saturday Evening Post *(Tunley, 1960)*. The images continue to be used. In "Losing Hope in Appalachia," the Boston Globe reported how one county in Appalachia compares poorly to underdeveloped countries in terms of its residents' health status and access to medical services *(Donnelly, 2003)*. In December 2006, the New Yorker ran an advertisement for Children Incorporated soliciting donations to sponsor impoverished Appalachian children. The lead caption for the ad read, "You don't have to leave your own country to find third-world poverty" *(p. 41)*. More recently, ABC television aired a documentary on "The Hidden America: Children of the Mountains," which played on stereotypical images of the region and its people *(Sawyer, 2009)*. A common thread in these depictions is that the region and its people need help. Moreover, they posit

that outsiders can provide the resources and talent needed for Appalachia to overcome poverty and distress.

While such images can draw attention and mobilize effort, they can also undermine a more nuanced understanding of Appalachia, thus complicating meaningful university rural community development outreach. For instance, there has been a recent trend for travel agencies and service organizations to promote travel to distressed places and regions to allow visitors to see poverty and even to help "make a difference" through volunteer efforts. Todd *(2008)* has ruminated on this rise of "voluntourism," noting that it reflects a desire by some to engage in authentic activity, but that the end result is somewhat artificial. The acts of assistance are more ritualistic and commodified than they are genuine. It is not difficult to comprehend how these same emotive forces might play on faculty members. There is the danger that outreach efforts to relatively remote locations, such as a poverty-stricken coal camp or a remote mountain hamlet, might appeal more to a faculty member's sense of charity than to a commitment to collaborative problem solving. The prospect of this also raises the challenge that meaningful engagement needs to be more than an academic version of "voluntourism." Coordinated university rural community development outreach efforts should anticipate and address these challenges.

The West Virginia Community Design Team Experience in Constructing Community

Acknowledging the social construction of community is central to the Community Design Team approach. The program members recognize that their outreach activities take place primarily in rural communities in the central Appalachian region. While seeking to be as inclusive as possible in engaging participation, the sense of community that is arrived at for the purposes of Community Design Team deliberation is interactive, contingent, temporal, and mutable. Recognizing this, the Community Design Team process attempts to prevent the tendencies of participants to create competing visions of community. Community Design Team leaders use various tools and techniques to overcome what Yankelovich *(1991)* has described as the dangers of "domination and distortion" that result when a few voices, often those of the privileged, steer the course of deliberation *(p. 216)*. In short, the richness of definitions and constructions depends, in part, on the breadth of participation by representatives of different community interests and perspectives. In the visit, the team's effectiveness in facilitating discussion and dialogue among local residents, and the

team members' own self-awareness of how they are "encountering" community, is crucial in achieving this objective.

Encouraging broad participation is one of the key responsibilities of the Community Design "advance team," which meets with the community representatives who are organizing and hosting a Community Design Team visit. The advance team (typically the Community Design Team's program coordinator and two or more faculty members) works from an application package provided by community representatives. The package contains information on the community's demographics and economy, along with a discussion of the issues, concerns, and attributes that the applicants consider important. While on site, the team reviews the purposes of the visit; seeks to align expectations with what the team can deliver; anticipates the types of specialists and experts who should be on the team; outlines the general schedule and format for the visit; and attempts to identify fissures within the community. In identifying conflict within the community, the advance team members can work with the community representatives to ensure that the community participants are truly reflective of the diversity of voices in the community. Past experience has shown that schisms left unaddressed in the initial stages of engagement can lead to failure in the overall team visit *(Loveridge & Plein, 2000; Plein & Morris, 2005)*. Ideally, a broad base of participation can lead to richer and fuller discussions about community development concerns, visions, and options during the Community Design Team visit.

During the full Community Design Team visit, efforts are made to create opportunities for citizens to offer their views on community. Theorists and practitioners stress the importance of creating a common ground for meaningful interaction that allows respect for differing opinions, the opportunity for respectful dialogue,; and an iterative process to comprehend the issues discussed *(Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002, pp. 405–406)*. To this end, the Community Design Team program utilizes a variety of approaches. For example, on the first full day of the visit, information sessions are held with community representatives and stakeholders. Typically, various citizens' groups, business groups, and local officials give presentations. It is not unusual for business representatives to define community around the immediate downtown commercial district. There is a concrete and physical framing to such depictions. Community groups, on the other hand, tend to describe community in associational and human terms. Their depictions often focus on demographic change—often the graying and/or decline of the population—or the need to recapture the sense of

"community" characterized by civic life and interaction that once existed in real or imagined terms. Student groups also participate in the Community Design Team process. They often interpret the community from details (e.g., a broken-down school bus shelter, a missing basketball hoop at the local park). When combined with the other presentations, the student perspective provides an intergenerational context that helps to situate the community in terms of its past, present, and future.

The first full day of a Community Design Team visit ends with an evening town meeting, which provides an opportunity for more interaction, expression, and discovery of shared, complementary, and divergent descriptions of the community. Various approaches are used to encourage the community's residents to share different perceptions of their community among themselves. These exercises include facilitated discussion as well as writing and mapping exercises that focus on current and prospective themes and issues. Because concepts of community are so often constructed from interpretations of the past, residents are asked to conduct a "generations" exercise in which they describe what life was like in the community at certain times in the past. Invariably, recollections differ and definitions of signature events vary, shedding new light on the community's multiple dimensions. These and similar exercises are recognized as critical to building a foundation for collaboration and action *(Burkhalter et al., 2002; Mehrhoff, 1999; Procter, 2005)*.

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Many years of Community Design Team program experience have highlighted the importance of developing tools and approaches that foster discussion, and break down barriers to discourse and understanding among residents. Through a variety of activities, the process works to ensure that multiple meanings of community are expressed and considered during the visit. The different forums and approaches allow a composite image of community to emerge. Residents are provided ample opportunity to offer descriptions of community,

and to identify related concerns, issues, and needs. By learning about different constructions of community from local residents during these activities, faculty member participants gain a better understanding of the community as well. Faculty participants are also immersed in the community through home stays with host families during the visit. Spending time with a local family provides opportunities for conversations and experiences that shed further light and understanding for the rural community development outreach process.

Rural Community Development Outreach: Purpose and Role

By considering how communities are constructed, participating faculty members can better appreciate how they construct their roles in rural community development outreach endeavors. This is important. Domahidy *(2003)* notes that the manner in which faculty, experts, and professionals define a community shapes the manner in which they formulate strategies and solutions to the problems they perceive to exist *(p. 79)*.

Problem Solving

Because communities are often framed as being "in need," the perception that problems exist to be addressed and solved shapes perceived roles and actions of engaged faculty members. There is a tendency to perceive university-community engagement as problem solving. Indeed, it is the sense that universities need to respond to social ills and community problems that, in part, prompted the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities *(1999)* to encourage a "returning to the roots" of the land-grant mission.

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Problem solving, however, results in its own consequences and challenges. Defining problems and offering solutions is difficult terrain to negotiate in the context of community engagement. Ideally, engagement can serve as a catalyst for positive action, but at the same time it may create challenges for others whose preferences and priorities run counter to proposed, or merely identified, courses of action.

Proposing solutions involves choices; solving problems portends change. Proposed solutions can create disruption and conflict. University outreach is not neutral. Invariably, those engaged in outreach must wrestle with dilemmas posed by involving themselves in the affairs of a community. It is best to proceed from the perspective that the university's mere presence *will likely* create disruption and uncertainty. In this way, conflict and disagreement can be better anticipated.

Disciplinary Perspective

Closely related to the issue of problem solving is the manner in which issues and solutions are framed from a disciplinary perspective. Academic specialization and professional expertise pose the risk that problems and solutions will be framed to conform with a specific disciplinary orientation. As Mehrhoff *(1999)* notes, "As the old saying goes, if your only tool is a hammer, every problem is a nail. The single-focus lenses of academic disciplines, although valuable as heuristic tools, distort the appearance and nature of our communities" *(p. xvi)*. Once problem identification and proposals for solutions move from theory to application, a new set of concerns emerges. Will the proposed solutions reflect the value preferences of the faculty members or the community members? Older models of outreach were predicated on the belief that the merits of outreach were legitimized by the technical and objective expertise that faculty members brought to bear on community needs. Contemporary observers often suggest that overcoming the challenges of disciplinary bias calls for a more pluralistic, inclusive, and multidisciplinary approach to outreach. An interdisciplinary approach brings more knowledge and experience to the table, and allows for solutions to be framed from more than one philosophical preference *(Domahidy, 2003; Loveridge, 2002; Mehrhoff, 1999; Plein & Morris, 2005)*.

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As a practical matter, and from a community member's perspective, it might be difficult to differentiate between recommendations that are grounded in disciplinary theory, and those that emanate from a preferred set of value choices about

society. Still, some community members may perceive outsiders as seeking to impose an agenda for action and change. Such reactions call for practices that seek to diminish skepticism, and build trust. Perhaps more challenging is the ongoing conflict within the academic community about the proper place of "advocacy" in engagement. As used here, advocacy is a commitment to a specific goal, the willingness to argue for the strategies to achieve the goal, and the willingness to actively assist in working toward the goal. While some argue that there is no place for advocacy in university engagement, others differ. Indeed, there are those who advocate that a key focus of service-learning pedagogy and community-based research should be "social change" that may require challenging the "status quo" *(Strand et al., 2003, pp. 81–85)*. Advocacy may necessitate faculty members "playing with boundaries" in order to advance social justice *(Kensen et al., 2003, p. 327)*. It may be necessary to help give voice to those who are perceived to be dispossessed *(Banks et al., 1993)*. Others argue that all service can be construed as some form of advocacy—whether it is to agitate for change or to maintain existing power arrangements *(Pillavin, Grube, & Callero, 2002)*. As more academic disciplines within universities use service-learning pedagogy, we may expect to see conflicts emerge when there is ambiguity in the purpose of the outreach endeavor. The Community Design Team model is a way to mitigate such conflict.

Dealing with Difference

Dealing with the issue of "faculty role" in rural community development outreach also involves the matter of "difference." Rural community development planners and scholars have long advocated that faculty experts seek to close the distance between themselves and those local residents they assist *(see, for example, Lancaster, 1952; Toner, 1979)* by jointly identifying needs, and developing alternatives for action that enable "valuing indigenous knowledges" *(Semali & Maretzki, 2004)*. Service-learning, community-based research, action research, and the community design team model are techniques that can minimize "difference" and can advance mutuality and reciprocity in university-community partnerships *(Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Hendriks, 2003; Kensen et al., 2003; Schafft and Greenwood, 2003; Strand et al., 2003; Zouridis, 2003)*.

Narrowing the distance between faculty "experts" and community members can be difficult. There is a long-standing tension between the idealized role of the "rational professional," and the more emotive and organic identity of the "virtuous citizen." Domahidy *(2003)* notes that it is the difference between "rational"

and "natural" will. The former is the function of the instrumental application of knowledge and logic; the latter is the acceptance of the outcomes of the mutual bonds of civic interaction *(Domahidy, 2003, p. 78)*. In university-community development outreach, role and identity must be negotiated. For university outreach to be credible, some level of expertise and competence must be maintained. Playing to stereotype or overcompensating by trying to be more "down home" or "down to earth," however, complicates the process *(Burkhalter et al., 2002, pp. 408–409)*.

The West Virginia Community Design Team Experience with Purpose and Role

Often, the arrival in a small community of 20 university faculty members, students, and professionals "makes waves" by surfacing conflict within the community. The prospect of change harbors uncertainty. Although the ideals of design and planning are aimed at managing change and diminishing uncertainty, the plans that will be proposed, the designs that will be adopted, and the manner in which both will be managed and implemented can cause concern and disagreement. Because of this, the Community Design Team process can be a lightning rod for surfacing long-standing and deep-seated community concerns and controversies. At times, the West Virginia Community Design Team has been the subject of controversy for its perceived association with certain community interests or groups, or with issues that have created conflict in the past. Some have perceived the Community Design Team as an intruder with its own agenda.

Some argue that controversy is necessary to promote an eventual joint understanding of the perceptions, needs, and opportunities facing a community *(Domahidy, 2003; Kensen, 2003; Mehrhoff, 1999)*. Some of the most difficult controversies that the West Virginia Community Design Team has encountered have involved perceptions that the team visit would lead to land-use and other regulations. Once, in responding to a survey about a team visit, a resident noted that during the visit "some hard feelings came from [team visit]" because some community members were willing to work for change while others were not *(Stead, 1998)*. In another instance, a town official's criticism made it to the local newspaper. He likened the Community Design Team's function and recommendations to "Stalin's Russia," and claimed that the Team's findings were "downright dangerous to our economy" *(Corcoran, 2002, p. 7)*. Leaders of the Community Design Team have learned that the best way to channel potential controversy is to

clearly communicate the Community Design Team's purposes and processes at the beginning and throughout the process.

Rural Community Development Outreach: The Key to Effectiveness

Advance planning through a community application process is the key process step for effective university-community outreach, particularly in rural community development endeavors. Leaders of the West Virginia Community Design Team have learned over time that careful planning to align expectations between the program and a community's organizing committee—prior to the site visit—is critical. Those requesting a visit are required to submit an application that details perceived challenges and opportunities facing the community, identifies key issues and concerns that they hope the team can address, and demonstrates the breadth of involvement by other stakeholders. Knowing the issues is key as Community Design Team representatives begin a dialogue to identify the concerns that are most feasible and salient to address. The application process also asks who from the community the organizing committee says will be involved. The Community Design Team leaders can take steps to ensure that community-based participation includes a wide spectrum of interests and stakeholders before the actual site visit. An advance visit, involving a few team representatives interacting with a local organizing committee, can further help to align expectations. By being "on the ground," the team representatives can further gauge the scope of issues and concerns that have been expressed, especially in spatial or geographic terms. All of this information helps program representatives as they assemble teams that can best match the subject area expertise and skills needed for the visit.

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Determining a Community's Priorities

Two parts of the application process include identifying the topical issues to address and the geographical locations on which

to focus. Often the two are interconnected. For example, given their disciplinary interests and reinforced by new models and theories that focus on sustainability and renewal, many team members tend to concentrate their attention on the old downtown business districts that characterize many of the small towns where the Community Design Team operates. These are prized public places that hold history and identity. They contain valued architecture and memories. They offer streetscapes waiting for the designer's plan for improvement. At the same time, they are often in decline: businesses have moved away, and residents have gone elsewhere for goods and services. For some engaged faculty members, the exit of businesses means the further erosion of community—the solution rests with bringing them back into the core downtown area to recapture the vitality of the past. For other engaged faculty members, the downtown represents a new opportunity to reinvent community so that mixed and sustainable development might occur, strip development on the outskirts of town might be mitigated, and visitors and others will be drawn to the downtown.

Determining the Geographic Area

Some team visits have focused on the old downtown district—because that was the perceived desire of the local residents. Other visits have focused on strip development, or on the approaches and entrances to the town center. Still other visits have been area- or countywide in focus, and have sought to situate individual towns and communities in relationship to each other.

If those local residents who are hosting and participating in the Community Design Team visit share the team's vision, then the work of the team is credible and may be fruitful in identifying options, resources, and opportunities for future action. If, however, community preferences are different yet the team continues to focus on Main Street, then the design team may steer treacherously close to defining what the community *ought* to be, rather than responding to citizen interests and needs. In some instances, for example, community members have expressed concerns that Community Design Team members wanted to turn their towns into tourist destinations, rather than revitalizing the community's economy with industrial, business, and other development. To illustrate, a community member expressed feelings that the Community Design Team wanted to make the downtown "quaint" with "arts and crafts stores" *(Clayberry News, 2007)*.

Summary

The Community Design Team process is meant to help "catalyze" rather than "lead" action—emphasizing that change must come from the community itself *(Loveridge & Plein, 2000)*. Experience has taught Community Design Team leaders that careful preparation is needed when working with communities. Careful preparation includes advance visits to the community and the use of multidisciplinary teams. A pluralistic approach to Community Design Team composition means that passion and advocacy, when present, can be diluted by the presence of other team members. Diverse team composition can also preempt recommendations that are too discipline-centric or prescriptive.

Conclusion

Although the issue of subjectivity has long been an epistemological concern in the manner in which scholars conduct inquiry, the issue becomes particularly relevant as academics encounter and engage communities, especially when they participate in rural community development outreach. The author's long-term participation in the West Virginia Community Design Team leads him to offer five points as a practical guide. The reader should consider these five points in her or his university-community engagement endeavors.

"Community" Is a Social Construction

First, community is a social construction. University participants must acknowledge the ambiguity of community. It is not uncommon to project a set of preferences and desires onto a community regarding what "ought" to be. Because of this, university members may be tempted to judge the current situation against their idealized visions of the past or future—neither of which may be a practical point of comparison or aspiration. In some circumstances, an image or definition of a community may be "prepackaged." This is especially the case with communities in rural areas or regions that have been subject to treatments in popular culture that portray the location as out of the "mainstream." University member definitions may not necessarily be consistent or well-founded, but instead may be a jumble of expectations and interpretations framed by emotion, memory, popular images, and professional training. The remedy for subjective construction rests with a pluralistic approach to defining community that involves many voices and participants.

Universities Engage People, Not Communities

Second, universities do not engage communities—university members engage people. No matter how searching and proactive a team's efforts may be, it is not possible to engage all of the stakeholders and interests in a community. Representation will not be equal at meetings; some voices will be louder than others. The sponsors who bring faculty to the community may be seen as aligned with some interests and not others. As Padt and Luloff *(2009, p. 240)* have observed, "Most leaders see the community through particular sets of lenses reflecting specific interests." This characterization extends beyond local government and elected officials, to include those involved in civic, business, and other interests. Faculty members involved in engagement have the responsibility to pull these all together in complementary ways. At the same time, they must recognize that their efforts will be imperfect.

Faculty Words and Recommendations Have Impact—Both Positive and Negative

Third, faculty words and recommendations make a difference. They can disrupt. Academics are trained to solve problems. Encountering a community will include identifying faults, challenges, and problems. Suggesting that a problem exists may upset some. Proposing the means of addressing and solving problems may upset others. Offering strategies that prioritize specific actions over others will disappoint some and satisfy others. Presence makes a difference. Some interests will be privileged, and some will be prejudiced when faculty visit and engage. From a practical and immediate perspective, faculty members must remind themselves that some will stand to win, and others to lose as a product of community design and development initiatives. Academics must acknowledge this, and should then make conscious decisions on how to promote inclusive and collaborative approaches to problem solving.

Faculty Members Offer Options

Fourth, because actions make a difference, faculty members who are engaged in community development have an obligation to help communities think through options. They must also do their best to help identify the potential consequences of action—or inaction. Offering a range of options allows for the "requisite variety" that decision-making theorists argue is necessary to envision broader consideration of alternatives and possibilities

(Ashby, 1964, p. 206). Most important, options offer a sense of choice and empowerment to the community. Alternative options can be seen as ideas and suggestions to consider. One option or a limited set of options may be viewed as an authoritative prescription.

University-Community Engagement Requires Intentional Administrative Support

Finally, programs like the West Virginia Community Design Team illustrate that higher education institutions can provide a framework for faculty engagement in community development. Doing so presents an institutional opportunity and obligation to create and sustain programming that is attentive to the way faculty members perceive the communities they engage and the roles that they play in outreach. As the Community Design Team process illustrates, these perceptions may be taken for granted, but they can be addressed, and it is often necessary to consider how approaches to doing so can be improved. Proactive efforts by university administrators to remind faculty that community is socially constructed, that it is citizens and residents who are to be engaged, and that both the promise and the fallibility of human nature will shape the way faculty engage community are necessary to make outreach more effective, and, ideally, more rewarding for all those involved.

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About the Author

Christopher Plein is an Eberly Family Professor of Outstanding Public Service at West Virginia University (WVU), assistant dean for the School of Applied Social Sciences, and chair of and associate professor in WVU's Division of Public Administration. Plein is a founding member of the West Virginia Community Design Team, a member of the Community Design Team steering committee, and a regular participant on team visits to rural communities.