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Cover Page Footnote

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Rural Community Development as a Teaching Environment for Cross-Professional Training in Macro Social Work and Community and Regional Planning

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Abstract. A rural community development project combined faculty and students from two courses (community and regional planning, and social work practice in groups, communities, and organizations) housed in different colleges (Arts and Sciences, and Health Sciences, respectively) at a medium-sized public university in a small Appalachian community. The project required students from two different courses to cooperate on data collection, and collaborate on analysis and recommendations, in an exploratory effort at cross-professional training focusing on social work and community development in a rural region.

Keywords: cross-professional pedagogy, macro social work, community and regional planning, rural community development

The professions of community practice in social work and community and regional planning have both overlapping complementary goals, and distinct differences in tools and terminology. Each profession's focus on effectively and equitably promoting community and economic development raises attendant questions of pedagogy and training—including theory and professional grounding, and the resources and tools with which practitioners should be equipped. This paper focuses on the question: How can tertiary educational institutions train professionals to work productively within and across disciplines, deploying both deep subject expertise and a broad view of healthy communities? Inter-professional education offers potential benefits for both academic (students and faculty) and community partners that justify the effort required for cross-professional training involving both formal and informal learning models. Such training may be particularly appropriate and useful in health-related fields, where collaboration is expected as part of professional practice (Barth, M., Godemann, J., Rieckmann, M., & Stoltenberg, U., 2007; Buring et al., 2009). While allied health fields are increasingly accepted as natural pedagogical and professional partners for social work (Wharton and Burg, 2017), fields beyond the medical and health domain offer largely untapped value for collaboration with social workers.

The project described here developed cross-professional training for students in community planning and social work. Both professions draw from multiple disciplines and practices, including—but not limited to—behavioral science, communication, community engagement, public policy, and public health. The modern planning and social work professions are guided by codes of ethics (American Planning Association, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 1996) that prioritize the greater public good, and are devoted to creating and supporting communities that are healthy, safe, prosperous, efficient, accessible, and equitable. While the terminology and tools of planning and social work have areas of overlap, distinct differences in the practices of the two fields present unique challenges to coordinated, integrated community development (Baum, 1997).

Community and regional planning professionals often train in spatial and geographic analysis, and in physical and social systems such as land use and transportation, architecture and landscape design, economic and community development, housing, and historic preservation, among others. Beyond these specializations, the professional duties of planners depend in part on the setting (urban, rural, and other forms), and whether they are generalists with diverse duties (common in smaller communities) or specialists with deep expertise and targeted tasks (more likely to be found in larger cities).

By contrast, social workers in community practice build on traditional grassroots organizing theories to generate social change and achieve maximum community functionality for vulnerable populations, promoting employment and economic empowerment. Community social workers seek to match community needs with available resources and develop partnerships, particularly in rural areas experiencing limited health and social services, such as medical facilities, primary and secondary schools, community organizations, and religiously affiliated organizations (Moore et al., 2016; Lewis, M., Scott, D., & Calfee, C., 2013).

The professions of regional planning and social work are neither monolithic, nor isolated and inward-looking. The public service orientation that planning shares with social work also aligns with public health, public administration, economic development, and other fields that promote community health and well-being. These pursuits often coexist and interact in regions with research universities that train students in complex and cross-disciplinary applied problem-solving. Students exposed to multiple disciplines and trained to deploy skills and knowledge in cross-sector partnerships may more effectively apply their expertise, connect with and mobilize stakeholders, and drive positive change. Such trans-disciplinary education is valuable for assisting communities in identifying strategies for improving social outcomes, and indeed may support a resurgence of civic academics (Checkoway, 2008) and an opportunity to use social entrepreneurship to pursue multiple goals simultaneously (Nandan & Scott, 2013).

This project was motivated by the opportunity to expose students from two different professions to the tools and terminology each deploys in field research, and to provide a baseline of data and analysis that may be useful for faculty and student research and future community partners and stakeholders.

Two Professions — One Community

This project was the third, and most ambitious, effort by the authors to coordinate two courses (social work in community practice, and community and regional planning) in a joint project to probe community needs and assets and to identify promising strategies for community development. The project was the manifestation of increasingly formalized collaboration by the authors, who have identified compelling commonalities and professional overlap in teaching and research. Driven by the pedagogical benefits we ourselves have derived from learning about each other's professions and identifying common professional ground, the authors linked up classes in planning (most recently, a graduate/undergraduate course in community development) and social work (a graduate course in groups, communities and organizations) to work jointly on place-specific problems in several North Carolina counties. These applied research experiences provided students with firsthand experience in the 'wicked problems' (complex and entrenched

problems that defy easy resolution — see Rittel & Webber, 1973) that characterize planning and social work, while producing actionable analysis for community partners. Rural regions and small towns face particular challenges — long distances and scattered populations, outmigration of younger and more educated residents, and changing economic conditions and labor markets. At the same time, small towns have long been the subject of less—and less formal and quantitative—attention from researchers and economists (Daniels, 1989). Although less populous, rural and small-town communities are complex and evolving, raising the prospect of context-sensitive research and thoughtfully designed policy (Johnson, 2006).

The spring 2019 collaboration focused on an expansive but sparsely populated county of fewer than 30,000 residents in western North Carolina; three municipalities combined are home to just over 3,000 residents, with the remainder of the population residing in unincorporated communities or in the countryside. Several factors motivated the choice of this study site: its proximity and availability for field trips (about 30 minutes from our institution), a stakeholder interested in the preliminary analysis, and previous exploratory work completed in the area by students in University business classes. A total of 32 students (18 from planning and 14 from social work) enrolled in the two spring 2019 classes researched and documented the county's assets and needs to develop recommendations for community development in terms of: 1) Food security and access; 2) Health and healthcare access; 3) Water and energy resources; 4) Jobs and commerce; and 5) Transportation and housing. During the course of this collaboration, we observed the students to be both challenged by the demands for cross-professional communication and cooperation, and inspired by opportunities to see and do things differently, all while pursuing established common goals. As described below, challenges included logistics, expectations, and professional cultures.

Advance Preparation and Course Management

Informal planning began the previous academic year, as the authors reviewed the results and lessons of earlier efforts. We considered the foundational knowledge with which students were likely to arrive (foundation-year graduate social work students; graduate and advanced undergraduate students in geography and planning), the key concepts and framing from each profession to convey to students in the other class, and the outlines of a feasible joint project that constituted part of the total body of knowledge and academic credit for a semester-long course.

We benefitted from an interested stakeholder (a community leader with experience in workforce development), and from earlier work completed for that individual by students in the College of Business, including asset mapping, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, and business plans. Given the exploratory nature of both our cross-professional pedagogical collaboration and the baseline community research in our subject county, we did not construct the project as an effort specifically to advance the stakeholder's professional and community goals, but invited him to midterm and end-of-semester meetings.

Assignments were drafted and revised well in advance of the semester, with a goal of providing clear structure and guidelines that align with both professions, while also communicating expectations for students to approach the joint work with openness and flexibility. Adjustments to assignments (content, guidelines, deadlines) reflected new knowledge

about the subject community, and emerging opportunities or complications to the assignments arising from cross-professional differences. Written products that reflect the effort of mixed teams (social work and planning, undergraduate and graduate) were graded with somewhat relaxed standards (e.g., for formatting, citing, and other practices that vary across professions); at the same time, evidence of critical thinking and analysis was expected, and creativity and insights from crossing professional boundaries were encouraged and rewarded.

Students were sorted into five working teams (environment—water and energy; food; health; jobs and commerce; and housing and transportation), based on stated preferences, with adjustments to ensure balance of social work and planning students and (within the planning class) of undergraduate and graduate students.

Class scheduling prevented regular joint sessions of the two classes. Instead, the two faculty members visited each other's classes several times during the semester to field questions and provide the other professional view. Outside of class, the working groups met as their schedules permitted, and submitted three joint assignments: secondary data, primary data, and analysis (asset maps, SWOT, interview instruments). They also shared their draft presentations, which followed two different structures, to inform the final presentations.

Work Products — Straddling Professions and Practice

Five progressive assignments began with secondary data collection (data from the U.S. Census, as well as other local, state, and federal sources), to sketch out the basic outlines of the subject county, followed by collection of primary data in the field—windshield or walking surveys to observe and document conditions. The third assignment required three analytical products, each with two components: an asset map (visual representation of assets across the county) with a list of community assets; a SWOT analysis with annotation; and a draft key informant interview instrument with a list of interview targets. The fourth assignment was completed by planning students only—a compilation of the data collected by all groups and analysis into a master report, with recommendations for the county's future economic and community development as well as for future student and faculty work. Finally, the students developed presentations, taking different paths for the two professions: Social work students completed a detailed analysis of a single recommendation for each working group, following a template that included community functions, change approach, resources, outcomes, and evaluation. By contrast, planning students compiled their materials into a single presentation, with front matter (introduction, purposes, and methods) and summary slides developed by graduate students, and undergraduate students providing several slides on each of the working groups. In addition, the graduate students in the planning course produced a 2-page executive summary of the entire project, to serve as a handout to interested parties, and shared with the community stakeholder along with the presentation.

One of the challenges of the joint project was accommodating curriculum targets for two classes that reside in different schools, leaving room for other course components that align with the two different professions, all while crafting a substantive project with meaningful and actionable analysis and findings. For the planning students, the joint project comprised five progressive assignments, accounting for one-third of their semester grade; the rest of their

academic requirements came from midterm and final exams, and an individual multi-part writing assignment on a place-specific planning problem in community development. For the social work students as well, the joint group project accounted for approximately one-third of their total course credit. In addition, social work students completed an analysis of the task group dynamics, including patterns of communication and member roles, for one-third. The final third of their grade was based on a written analysis of services—related to their working group theme—available in the community to address the needs of under-served populations.

Asset mapping. After reviewing a range of asset mapping tools, and becoming familiar with the ABCD (asset-based community development) framework of Kretzmann & McKnight (1996), the five working teams drew from their primary and secondary data to list and map community assets. Some teams produced a static map of assets, while others built interactive web-based tools; this variety reflected varying capacity and spatial skills of the various teams. This assignment provided students an opportunity to appreciate the skills and expertise of different professions. The social work students were for the most part unfamiliar with web-based mapping and physical and spatial analysis in which many planning students are skilled; at the same time, they offered their own expertise—foundational knowledge and skills in individual and household-level interaction and services—that complemented the planners' professional contributions.

SWOT analysis. Students read and discussed a variety of applications of SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis—a common tool for self-study and analysis that uses a two-by-two framework (internal/external crossed with positive/negative) to assess conditions and identify possible strategies for organizational or community improvement (Community Tool Box, 2019). Each working team developed a SWOT analysis of the strengths (internal/positive), weaknesses (internal/negative), opportunities (external/positive) and threats (external/negative) that related to their focus. Each SWOT table was accompanied by a narrative description of the items in each cell, as well as a discussion of some of the nuances, e.g., where threats may bleed into opportunities or weaknesses present as the back sides of strengths, or where external forces interact with internal characteristics. Figure 1 shows part of the SWOT table generated by the health team; they also provided a narrative discussion of their analysis, describing the breakdown of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and discussing the ways in which the various categories overlap and intertwine.

This assignment provided students with an opportunity to discuss differences in professional perception of the same issue. Some students noted during their presentation that they found that some threats could also be seen as opportunities, and some strengths could also be seen as weaknesses.

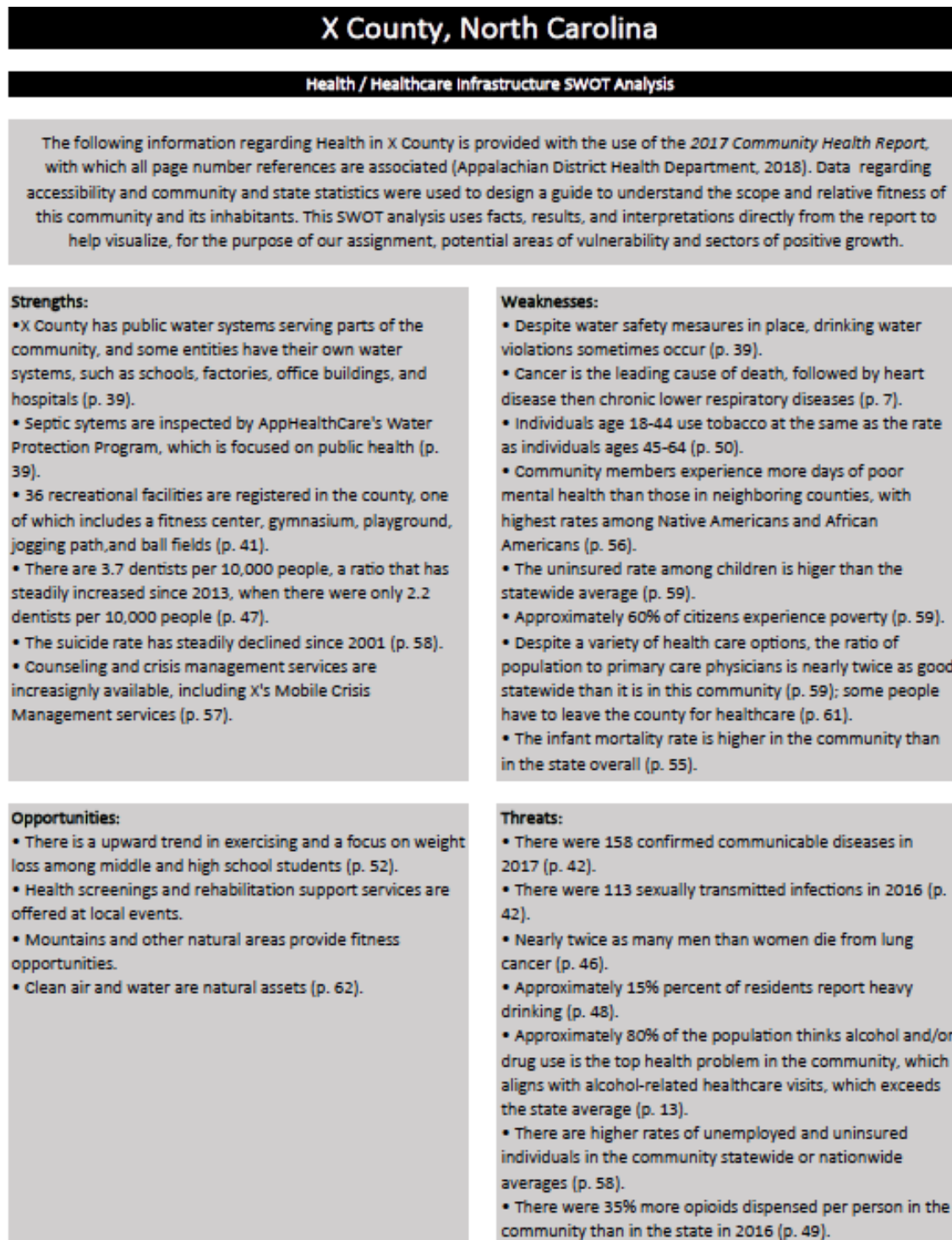


Figure 1. Excerpt of SWOT analysis produced by student health team.

Key informant survey instruments. Students reviewed and discussed readings in qualitative research methods, including interviewing techniques (Dillman et al., 2014; Toseland & Rivas, 2005). Each working team developed a short list of interview questions appropriate to ask of key informants—subject experts with knowledge of local conditions and relationships. Table 1 shows the interview questions proposed by the health team. Teams appended to their proposed interview instrument a list of people to attempt to interview—either actual people (with contact information) in relevant positions, or a list of professional roles that would be appropriate and productive to interview (e.g., school nurse, economic development director). The interview questions were retained for future deployment in the subject community, or in others, as needed.

Table 1

Interview Questions Developed by Health Team

1. What do you see as strengths in terms of health within X County?
 2. What do you see as weaknesses in terms of health within X County?
 3. What do you see as opportunities (from factors beyond the community) in terms of health in X County?
 4. What is the biggest barrier to X County residents getting their mental health needs met?
 5. What do you see as threats (from factors beyond the community) in terms of health in X County?
 6. How do you feel about health care options in X County, including quantity, quality, and accessibility?
 7. Do you feel that access to reliable transportation impacts X County citizens' health?
 8. In terms of health in X County, which area receives the majority of funding (preventative, emergency, physical, mental, etc.)?
 9. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about health in X County?
-

This assignment enabled students to realize and acknowledge each group's connection to the community. While planning students identified one set of professionals to interview, the social work students identified an entirely different set of potential interviewees. This helped students realize that their shared efforts enabled a broader approach to a problem.

For this exploratory cross-professional collaboration between social work and planning classes, the work products were generally appropriately focused, relevant, and indicative of student understanding of the purpose of the exercise. A few teams produced polished and potentially useful work products; others were clear student products that would need more effort to be applied. In the long term, the purpose of the cross-professional collaboration is threefold: 1) provide students with meaningful opportunities to develop and deploy useful skills, 2) generate actionable data and analysis for community partners, and 3) develop a body of experience that advances our cross-professional experience and generates new curricular materials.

Discussion

This collaboration, now entering its fourth year, has yielded a foundation of experience and new prospects for cross-professional applied training. The authors meet frequently to troubleshoot problems in the current semester, to discuss process and progress toward the next,

and to articulate lessons learned. In addition, we have begun to formalize our collaboration with program evaluation, using controlled questions for students. For the planning students, two questions were part of midterm and final exams; social work students answered these questions as part of their customized end-of-semester class evaluation.

Lessons Learned

The challenges in a project such as this fall into several major areas: logistics, expectations, and professional cultures.

Logistics. The limitations of academic calendars and spatial separation (two colleges separated by three miles) are hard to overcome. Because of late-breaking schedule changes in two different departments (indeed, in two different colleges), the two courses did not have any overlapping meeting time, thwarting efforts to hold several all-hands meetings with 32 students split among the two groups. Future iterations will seek to arrange overlapping meeting times, well in advance of the semester. Distance is harder to manage; enrollment of more than a dozen students makes it hard to deliver students to another location, even in a department van, and raises complications in organizing personal vehicles and carpooling.

Some challenges of academic schedules can be—and were—successfully addressed with careful advance planning of assignment deadlines and major events (community guest speakers, faculty swaps). At the same time, students need to actively absorb exhortations from faculty to prepare for and adapt to some scheduling and assignment changes—made more complex when collaborating with students from another department and college. Some of the challenges in crossing professional cultures (discussed below) were exacerbated by seemingly mundane logistics failures, and will be addressed by the authors in future joint projects with mandatory meetings, discussions of shared readings, organized field work, and guest speakers.

Future collaborations may involve travel to community sites (already funded for the next academic year); past collaborations have taught us that students may treat travel arrangements and logistics (such as meeting with community stakeholders and partners) with a problematically relaxed attitude that falls short of professional standards. Students who fail to meet a scheduled shuttle or who arrive late for events have contributed to unfavorable outcomes in past efforts. The authors have resolved that future travel to community partners in official vehicles (department van or university motor pool) will be mandatory—to keep logistics clean and orderly, and to make travel time useful for preparation and coordination.

Expectations. Expectations relate to both internal (faculty and students) and external (community partners) relationships. For students, we developed firm but reasonable expectations (for attendance, participation, and contribution to the group process, as well as careful writing and thoughtful analysis), coupled with flexibility that values creativity and willingness to try to understand the language and practices of another profession. These professional cultural differences include different terminology and framing of society (individuals, families, and organizations, and the physical and natural environments they occupy), different levels of comfort and familiarity with group work (meetings, communication, divided and shared duties), and both overlapping and distinctly different data sources and standards for collection and

analysis. For interactions with community partners, experience teaches us to manage expectations carefully: offer to our partners the energy and insights of a team of young and motivated students in advanced courses, but clearly note the limitations of the academic semester and the non-professional status of students. Advance discussion on what a community partner can anticipate getting from a student team, with reasonable parameters for scope and scale, allows students to hit—and often exceed—targets for useful work products.

Professional culture. Professional culture, in our view, is both the greatest challenge — and potentially the most rewarding component of our collaboration. Just as graduate and advanced undergraduate students are closing in on a body of knowledge and a skillset that cement their identification with their chosen profession, we ask them to step outside that new identity and try on another. Some students jump right in and embrace this new wrinkle in their professional preparation; others resist or grudgingly go along for the ride. Our motivation for this ongoing collaboration is rooted in our own interaction as academics working in fields focused on healthy, just and thriving communities, and the benefits we have gained from learning about each other's professions. While the body of social work literature acknowledges the need for inter-professional training, this training can be limited to traditional professional linkages that place people as part of the social welfare and healthcare systems but have a limited view of people as part of the economic and environmental systems in which they are located. As research related to the social determinants of health reveals, less than 20% of health is related to medical care and access, while the largest impact on health is related to employment, environment, and neighborhood (Nandan & Scott, 2013). Thus, it is imperative that social work students also understand the work of professionals in economic and workforce development and in community planning; meanwhile, planning students benefit from understanding the professional training and tools of social workers who will be practicing in their communities in a variety of settings and organizations.

Project Evaluation

Beginning in spring 2019, students in the two classes involved in a joint project on community development answered controlled questions (midterm and final exam questions for planning students; exit class evaluations for social work students). These questions will be repeated in future iterations of the joint class.

Answers to these controlled questions reveal some expected similarities and differences between the two groups of students—as well as some surprising and illuminating comments. Select responses are reported below. We are working on a deeper analysis of the data from ongoing project evaluation; a companion paper currently in preparation performs content analysis on the pooled and anonymized text responses.

Student comments, collected as part of midterm (planning students) and final exams (both planning and social work students), reveal both common themes and distinct differences. The social work students frequently commented on their perception that planners are more objective and quantitative, compared to more qualitative and subjective social workers. Several noted that the planning students care about people, but are always aware of physical space. This likely reflects planning students' academic training, which sensitizes them to concepts of

proximity, connectivity, and quality of place (attributes like access, equity, and efficient legible design) as part of the planning process. The following three quotes come from Social Work students:

“Working with planning students on the project to assess needs in [] County was incredibly beneficial, as it allowed for me to consider different needs in a totally different light. From my experience with this project, I now look at communities in a completely different way. Although collaboration can be difficult, it is so important to consider different points of view and expertise- especially since we live in a world where everyone is different. Overall our group was able to include a larger variety of data, which positively influenced our needs assessment for [...] County.”

“It was a different way of pulling me out of my comfort zone and forcing me to think not only about how I see things, but how others see things. It was challenging to step out of the box and consider that the planning students were not seeing things as I did. However, it provided a lot of insight and it was extremely awesome how two professions pulled through to help the minorities in the community.”

“Social work students see a community as the following: how can we help the community be successful, what are some resources we can recommend, and how can it affect them? Planning students see a community as the following: Who do we go talk to about this or that, where can we get this type of labor, and how can we make it successful? SW students see the inner side of the community while the planning students see the outer layer, but with both groups working together, they can make a community be successful.”

Planning students generally valued the opportunity to work with social workers, and noted their greater focus on individuals and households rather than organizations, as well as a service or treatment orientation that differs from the planner’s perspective on designing efficiency and equity into community landscapes and systems. The following three quotes come from Planning students:

“Working with Social Work graduate students is an interesting task. When they approach needs they take the perspective of the typical individual who would reside in that place. Whether they be a 25-year-old white male working at the local power plant. Or the 15-year-old girl who stays home to help care for the family because their guardian suffers from addiction. Those perspectives mold the idea of what community health is like while the planner looks at the physical and infrastructural dynamic that creates a more livable built environment capable of providing a better quality of life.”

“Working with the Masters of Social Work students has been informative, because they have an impressive working knowledge of public community resources and insight into what community members think or feel. As someone studying public administration, sometimes I focus on the quantitative data in order to form my opinion about a community. For example, I focus on how many hospitals or health care providers a

community has, but social workers tend to focus on how and what services they provide as well as patient experiences.”

“I learned a lot from working with the social workers. Not only how to communicate better with people I've never meet; but it was a learning experience trying to get everyone on the same page at the same time. It's important to have as many different backgrounds solving a problem because each person has their own knowledge and experiences. It's important to come up with a few different solutions to a problem because these are complex problems that need many small solutions [...].”

Comparing comments from the two groups (planning and social work students) suggests that the planning students may come into the project with training and professional identity that more easily accommodate another set of principles and practices, while the social work students had a wider gap to cross to embrace a view of serving people as embedded in a larger environment. We see a challenge of our joint project being one of passive vs. active pedagogy, i.e., the difference between learning about vs. experiencing social work and planning in the community. Notably, we ourselves continue to grow professionally through this collaboration—learning more about our own chosen disciplines as we work with and guide students to learn from students in a complementary field, and presenting our experience at conferences for both planners and social workers in the U.S. and abroad. Distilling the foundational principles of one profession to convey to students and professionals in another has forced both of us to reflect on our fields, and to see our professions as connected to other public-serving endeavors.

Conclusion

An ongoing and evolving faculty collaboration that brings together students from two different professions to study community development revealed both the promise and the challenge of joint professional training to equip university students with deeper insights into modern social problems. Evaluation using student responses to controlled questions revealed both appreciation for and frustration with cross-professional assigned tasks. The next step in this project will use internal funding to support two graduate students (one each from planning and social work) to help design the next joint project, for spring 2020. The authors plan to strengthen the model with 1) shared key readings to more clearly introduce students from each of the two professions to the other; 2) guest lectures from practicing community planners and social workers; and 3) compatible schedules that support periodic joint sessions.

Each of three semesters of this collaboration has demonstrated how our professions work the same ground but with different tools, sometimes yielding different outcomes in analyzing problems and proposing solutions. After assigning mixed student teams (from social work, planning, public administration, Appalachian studies, and sustainable development) to work together on various tasks, we have identified barriers to cross-professional communication, and differences in how our professions view our practices and our place in the realm of public and social service. With each iteration, we have made progress in developing curriculum and setting targets for students that strike a productive balance between the discomfort of stretching beyond familiar professional territory, and the reward of gaining new shared perspectives. As we mix our students in teams and on tasks, they tackle questions of immediate interest to community

partners, and surmount challenges in team logistics and cross-professional communication and problem-solving.

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