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EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAINSTREET AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF A SMALL UNIVERSITY IN A SMALL TOWN

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Abstract

The research has been conducted to gain insight and understanding of how downtown culture is perceived by college students. The data collected were from students at a small university in a small town of fewer than 50,000 people. Of the 120 responses, 30% came from students who were originally from city, 26% came from students from somewhere else in the state, 22% came from students that were originally from somewhere else in the country besides the state, and 17% are from international students. The research employed a 28-question survey based on personal opinion of downtown culture and how involved students are there in the said culture. The results indicate that it would be very beneficial if downtown area held more events that are open to the whole community. It is especially important to hold events that include our diverse population of people who are from out of state or from a country abroad that are similar to military appreciation events. The future studies may investigate community/university student partnerships through interdisciplinary outreach and participation as well as service-learning. The universities can play a significant role as innovation and research hubs, bringing together public, commercial, and non-profit institutions.

Keywords: culture, perception, opinion, events, boredom, city revitalization

INTRODUCTION

The research explored the relationship between the student body at a small regional university in a small town of fewer than 50,000 people and that local community's downtown business climate. The university, chosen for the purpose of this case study, is landlocked and the geography is not conducive to walking to commerce centers such as downtown. Here, we define "landlocked" as a distance that creates obstacles for walking to various destinations due to weather conditions (particularly during winters), access to rivers and railroad crossings, etc. The downtown business climate can improve methods of integrating students into the local culture similar to results of other cities with sizeable university student populations. The goal of our study was to investigate the students' perception of the downtown climate and to explore ways to strengthen that relationship. The research focuses on small businesses, operating on main street in the downtown trade area. We believe that exploring this relationship between university students and downtown small businesses may help generate innovative ideas, and the student body may, in turn, become more attracted to downtown activities. There may not be one or two large

solutions to this persistent problem, but we believe that there may be a small incremental steps to slowly improve this connection by attracting more students to become a part of the culture of the downtown trade area.

Research Questions

1. How have other communities connected local university students to the commerce centers within a community?
2. What are the economic and social benefits for the city after developing better connections between the university students and city?
3. How can we incentivize university students to visit downtown and make them excited about going there?

Our overall goal was to develop an outline for actions that could pave the way to connect the downtown community and university students. The entertainment, internships, community projects involving students, and developing some student-specific transportation to connect students to downtown are some possible steps toward building a better connection with the university. We have suggested ways to add excitement to the downtown area that would help attract students and other residents of the city to visit downtown. By improving the quality of downtown life, hopefully, we can draw in more students and make a beneficial change for the local community. We have recognized that the city's downtown community and the university community are both vibrant; however, they remain separated and can be better integrated. One of our goals is to integrate the two communities. We feel that college students aged 18-20 who are not yet of legal drinking age and do not have a mode of transportation are an untapped market that downtown businesses are overlooking. A specific facet of this study is marketing the downtown community to the university campus. The more we educate students on what downtown has to offer, the more inclined they may be to spend time there. Another area we would like to focus on

is making transportation affordable and convenient between campus and downtown.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Boredom

Students often and anecdotally complain about boredom at landlocked university campuses. Boredom in students has many negative psycho-social impacts, as well as a negative impact on grades, academic behavior, and even dropout rate (Watt & Vodanovich, 2010). To understand the problem, we need to understand the root of the dilemma of boredom. In a classroom context, students' perceptions of bored teachers increased their own feelings of boredom, which decreased their drive to study. (Tam, et al., 2020). Boredom is an aversion for a repetitive experience of any kind, routine work, or exposure to dull and boring people (Watt & Vodanovich, 2010). Boredom applies to a situation when students feel they have nothing to do. It can also lead to extreme restlessness under conditions when escape from constancy is impossible (Watt & Vodanovich, 2010). If and when there are vibrant and non-repetitive experiences in a downtown area, there needs to be a way for students to be inclined to visit. Solving boredom can help students in several ways.

In order to appreciate the implications of boredom, we have to examine it from the psychological and social lenses. Researchers have suggested that boredom can affect grades, diminished academic achievement, truancy, dropout rates, school dissatisfaction, and oppositional behavior (Watt & Vodanovich, 2010). In the world after college, boredom can be a direct cause of job dissatisfaction, a feeling of unfulfillment, and even increased accident rates (Watt & Vodanovich, 2010). Solving this problem would mean more to students than giving them a place to visit, as conquering boredom has other benefits as well, not originally noticed such as grades, social interactions, and a feeling of satisfaction. We believe a vibrant and connected community can reduce boredom's adverse effects (Watt & Vodanovich, 2010).

Cities

Lederer (2007) discusses the revitalization of downtown in mid-sized cities and provides the factors that influence the success or failures of downtown revitalization. Recent studies have observed that those mid-size cities ranked as having successful or very successful downtowns all shared distinctive attributes such as elevated levels of pedestrian activity; a strong tourist or visitor appeal; a well-preserved historical district; attractive natural features such as waterfronts; and the presence of a university in the downtown (Lederer, 2007). Lederer especially focuses on the significance of a university's role in a city and suggests the city should implement a "pedestrian-friendly environment" by facilitating pedestrian activities such as the improvement of sidewalks and providing street food.

Universities play an increasingly prominent role in shaping regional, social, and economic development. Universities serve as knowledge intermediaries, knowledge gatekeepers, knowledge providers, and knowledge evaluators, according to research findings. (Ardito, et al., 2019). Massey, Field, and Chan (2014) talk about how university and town administrators play a vital role in establishing a positive relationship between students and community members, and eventually, it would encourage local employment and industry. They argue. A university-wide initiative by career fairs and the communities to increase student recruitment and retentivity may need to concentrate on students who have little job prospects as a result of poor or non-existent domestic industry. These measures could include attracting new businesses to town; increasing student internships and graduate career opportunities; and creating a structure to stimulate industry-specific entrepreneurship. (Massey et al., 2014). Therefore, town-gown relations are an essential part of local developments and employment boost in small and medium - size cities.

There has been an economic impact on struggling downtown communities in northeastern Pennsylvania from five colleges around the area (Fischer, 2008). The primary college discussed by Karin Fischer is King's College. *Struggling Communities Turn to Colleges* starts with describing what the downtown community looks like by stating, Across the street from King's College, the decaying buildings have become an embarrassment. Broken windows poked holes in drooping structures, and police patrols were called in following reports of illegal behavior. (Fischer, 2008, paragraph 1). The local downtown area of this current manuscript is not damaged to this degree, but there are some buildings and fixtures that could be improved. In Wilks-Barre Pennsylvania, small, private liberal-arts institutions like King's are assuming a greater responsibility for community and economic development. Within these institutions, their alumni are raising money to purchase abandoned buildings. After purchasing these buildings, they relocate college facilities, such as bookstores and residence halls to these renovated areas. By doing this, they are working to better connect faculty experts with local entrepreneurs which further strengthens ties between the community and the university.

Since smaller colleges operate on thin financial margins without the assistance of a large endowment, they must be cautious in taking on economic-development projects (Fischer, 2008). After the colleges analyze a situation, they can then decide if the long-term benefits outweigh the initial costs. One example of this was when Wilkes and King's agreed to close their on-campus bookstores to help attract a Barnes & Noble downtown. This development is important to help attract other retailers downtown, and the colleges plan to earn back their investment of building purchases within a few years through increased sales if everything goes as planned. They state that they turn down the offers to purchase property, but it could be beneficial by getting fresh minds to go in and do some revitalization in downtown area.

Another example is Detroit`s transformation from a thriving center of trade and commerce to its present abandoned state (Braithwaite,

3

2012). In addition to what it used to be, there was an urban design strategy for Detroit that could create a branch between nature and culture, by designing a new technical college. In Braithwaite's article, he presents diverse ways to go about it and their processes. First, Braithwaite explored the 'zone of influence,' and then explored the city`s prevailing conditions including its infrastructure, buildings, and its current relationship with the natural environment. The second section is about the 'zone of control.' In this section, a new urban classification that is appropriate to the proposed college institution is proposed. The current classifications are urban city and urban prairie, but Braithwaite believes it to be somewhere in between. For the third area of Braithwaite's article, there's a 'zone of effect,' which displays the influence the proposed campus could have in promoting land development in the city`s residential areas, Eastern Market District, and Rivertown Warehouse District along the Detroit River waterfront. The proposed development of this college campus provided a way to investigate issues that come from underused or abandoned infrastructure and the need for a new architectural design that is appropriate for shrinking cities. Even though local city may not be a large industrial city like Detroit, we still have buildings downtown that may need to be renovated and something creative could be done to make it a more appealing location.

Students

Van den Berg and Russo (2003) examined strategic city planning for students in Europe and discussed the role of international students and the culture brought by these students. Van den Berg and Russo argue that increased international students' mobility is a major vector of socio-economic integration between regions of Europe (2003). Since Europe has more open access to attend college for international students from both EU countries and non-EU countries than that U.S. has. It has been experiencing the significance of this aspect, and Van den Berg and Russo explain that they bring about social innovation

and cultural change. (Gainza, 2018), The extent of cultural agglomeration is revealed to be a strategy for formulating cultural strategies in urban redevelopment. In recent years, there have been discussions about the effectiveness of community service and service-learning, namely through college and university students in the United States.

There were two case studies done to find the deliverables from students having more of an impact within their community. In the first case study, students from different institutions from the Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges (LVAIC) were hired as research assistants to work on policy-focused research projects. After finishing their projects, they found that it provided an area for students from a variety of disciplines to learn from each other and expand their network. As for the second case study, it focused more on Allentown, Pennsylvania, and its decline in downtown during the past quarter-century. The undergraduates from the Lehigh Valley Research Consortium (LVRC) met with representatives of Pennsylvania to discuss the goals of the research and to identify the information required for the design of the survey. This survey would be a needs assessment for some students, and for others, it would be about assistance with agriculture. After conducting the research, they met with the city officials once again to discuss how the data can be used by the city and what information officials needed that was not produced by the survey.

Overall, students can branch out and find ways to improve their local community that the city may not have thought of themselves. Within *Connecting Students to their Community: A Public Research Model of Service*, there are ways described that have worked in other communities that people of city may consider for themselves.

Integration

Gilmore and Comunian (2016) explain the collaboration between the university and downtown culture by showing the opportunities based on mutual acceptance of each other (Gilmore & Comunian, 2016). Building ties with community people during a project raises the likelihood of a successful conclusion and the prospect of future long-term collaborations. (Claw et al, 2018). This collaboration stimulates innovation, creativity and cultural clusters, sector development and graduate employability as well as a broader contribution to economic development and regeneration. This has been shown to improve the culture of the city and bring in future opportunities to the local university.

Knowing this information, we can deduce that having a similar collaboration between the University and downtown area could improve city, and the connection between the city and the university. This can be a continuous collaboration to improve both parties involved and can form connections within the community. These connections can bring jobs to the university students and lead to more students wanting to live in the city after graduation.

When one thinks of the traditional American "college town" as an idyllic place, it is anticipated that the college community permanent residents and local businesses should co-exist with one another. Pennsylvania and Chicago Universities have designed plans and have been successful in the revitalization of their campuses and neighborhoods.

Success in the community and the success of the college are directly correlated. Their long-term futures are not dependent on one another, but if one fails to be successful so will the other. The two must lean on each other in order to thrive. A tactic that other colleges have previously found successful is by pursuing solutions for persistent community issues. In the city, the downtown could use help becoming more vibrant. The university also has a very capable and dedicated art program. The students could be placed in charge of making our downtown more vibrant and welcoming by using the skills and knowledge they possess. There would need to be communication between the downtown and the art program, but there is a likelihood they could each benefit from such an idea.

Cultural competency, according to (Claw et al., 2018), is the ability to recognize, convey, and understand cultural differences while engaging effectively with people from other cultures. It is critical for academics to strive for cultural competency in order to better comprehend a community's cultural values and norms. Researchers should approach Indigenous communities with humility, understanding, and an open mind to learn. Indigenous groups may feel that their ideas and knowledge are undervalued or ignored if a research endeavor lacks cultural competency.

Since revitalization can be expensive, there should be an adequate incentive to use the resources that already exist within a community. Utilizing the college students who are enthusiastic and willing to revitalize a downtown may be exactly what the local community needs. Academic activity, according to Gainza, X. (2018), must be related to the world outside of the institution. These are precise recommendations for integrating a university with its surrounding community. Whether on or off campus, college students want to feel at ease. Sadly, the latter frequently disappoints them. Giving to the city's downtown with their creativity, enthusiasm, and craftsmanship is exactly the kind of thing that will bring the neighborhoods closer together.

Elman and Gallagher (2019) explain the importance of community and school integration. To confront these challenges, communities are deploying assets like arts and culture. Creative placemaking is a well-known program that involves cross-sector collaboration to create arts-centered projects with local benefits. It may be done in any community of any size. Small and midsize cities, as well as rural areas, have been highlighted by arts advocates. Because the population of small cities and rural villages is diverse and

heterogeneous, it is vital to analyze how circumstances outside of metro regions effect collaboration and projects.

This article is about Rapid City, South Dakota, a tiny Midwestern city that serves a geographically dispersed population. By highlighting the challenges and providing insights into creative placemaking, this study adds to the little body of research on collaboration in small and medium cities. Funding and participation emerged as critical issues in this small city cooperation situation.

The engaged university ideal is something the university should strive to be. The term is intended to link university and community partnerships across the country. It is a fairly recent perspective on higher education. The goal is to integrate the teaching, research, and service functions of the university in an interdisciplinary manner.

Administrative leadership is key to creating an engaged university. Decisions made regarding the college must also be considered from an outsider's perspective. For example, events put on by the college should interest more than just college students, and downtown businesses could participate. Collaboration should become an important part of events hosted in either downtown or on campus. Views of the engaged community are that they are similar to "land-grant" universities. However, they have two very different ideas behind them. Land-grant universities have more of a "community as a client" view (Mayfield, 2001). The government gives funding to these universities and in return require public service (such as research) in return for that funding. An engaged university does not acquire any funding; however, it provides benefits to its community, which the university then mutually benefits from. Students who attend such universities will learn how to be active in fulfilling their functions in society (Mayfield, 2001). Instead of graduating and then trying to form connections with local businesses, students would be given a greater opportunity of forming them in advance.

We need to have a way of getting the message out to students that downtown is a fun and exciting place, full of opportunities. Before the university can be engaged, the students must be aware of what they are engaging in. Downtown is often overlooked by the university students for several reasons. For one, there is little to no marketing for it anywhere in the city, especially on campus. Second, if students do not have public transportation, it is not the easiest place to get to. Many ideas can be implemented in order to create an engaged university, but the first place to start is knowledge. Students need to be aware of what downtown and the local community has to offer them, and then they may be more inclined to contribute to its success.

City Revitalization

Meghan Rich (2013) explains how the city of Scranton, Pennsylvania went from a sad, desperate town to a revitalized city. Making Scranton into a revitalized city took the whole community to take it out of its post-industrial slump. She emphasizes the role of a city's strengths like city livability and the thick social ties that maintain communities.

This applies directly to the city when it comes to family ties and city livability. Focusing on such strengths could eventually lead this city to the revitalization that Scranton had. The local residents have shown pride in their city to the extent that they could be willing to fund a better city if they have the disposable income. The community's help to improve livability could lead to a revitalization just as evinced by Scranton's success story.

Roth (2011) also found research into a more rural town's revitalization. He states that if a town wants to revitalize, the residents will need to collaborate with the local university if they have one. He displays the success story of initiatives taken by the Main Street Merchants Association in 2007. His study has advanced the view that cities, which collaborate with their local universities improve the economy and revitalize the communities. If the university and the local community would

6

collaborate, they could improve the city and help each other. The economy could improve just as it did in Pennsylvania.

Finding ways to begin a collaboration between a university and the community may be difficult. But a group of researchers have found a potential way to begin this collaboration. Their way to begin this collaboration was having a community workshop hosted at the university (Gilmore and Comunion, 2016). They had multiple different workshops that were evaluated and proved to work. To make the group work, they had faculty volunteers who were committed to work involving the community partnerships. This gave an advantage of having future workshops and a sense of connection for the community.

By using the model of foundation that Plakins, Alper, Colvin, Aquilino, Louko, Zebrowski, and Ali all made for their university, the university and local community can use this for their own needs. For over 3 years, 6 faculty members and 1 graduate student gathered as a working group for applying an interdisciplinary focus to public engagement projects involving immigrant families in the rural Midwest (Plakans, et al., 2016).

Economic Factors

Comunian, Faggian, and Jewell (2014) suggest that having a connection between the arts and humanities and the city will improve the local economy. Such a connection supplies jobs to the arts and humanities department, and they will bring in creativity that will attract customers. Similar to Comunian, Taylor, and Smith (2014), it is believed that collaboration between the University's arts and humanities department and downtown area can prove beneficial to all parties involved. With art and culture entering downtown area, more people will want to visit which may improve sales for businesses. This can be shown with the reaction to the murals in downtown area and the multiple university students that go to photograph it. With more attractions like this provided by the arts and humanities

department, more traffic will go to downtown area.

Comunion, Taylor, and Smith (2014) suggest that regional and urban development has been tied directly to local universities and their growth-promoting potential. They start with the relationship between the university and the local creative culture. It also explains the difficulties of integrating college graduates into the community to grow mutually and economically. This also applies to the city's current status because the city is growing its downtown currently. With local development growing, this can be a time for the university to create a local creative culture within the region. It also shows a way we can integrate college graduates into the community to grow mutually and economically.

To further the evidence that universities are beneficial, Sanchez-Barrioluengo and Benneworth (2019) explain how universities benefit local communities through work and the economy. They suggest that there are two different areas the university affects the community. The entrepreneurial approach and the engaged approach. Findings showed the connection between these two approaches to the community and how each affects the community. This can change our view on how we can perceive how the University is currently approaching the city. Understanding the approach, the university has can lead to how it currently is impacting and viewed by the community.

Another short snippet of information found on Aberdeen; South Dakota's downtown website talks about how they view downtown as the 'heart of Aberdeen.' On their website, they state a few things their downtown helps with. These statements include keeping profits in the town instead of chain businesses that send profits out of town, providing stable economic foundations with ties to the community, and supporting local community projects, such as teams and schools.

Government Role

Lawrence Weill, the president of Gordon College in Barnesville, Georgia is enthusiastic

about integrating his downtown community with his college. According to Weill, a college within a town can be compared to how churches formerly functioned in medieval Europe. By this, he means that they should operate as a central focus relevant to the entire community. Whether people are affiliated with the college or not. Churches back then offered the community benefits intellectually, economically, and created diversity. Colleges today should do just that. (Weill, 2009). However, colleges within towns often are regarded as somewhat disrespectful to the permanent residents in the area (Nunery, 2003). There are complaints pertaining to some issues, especially ones regarding college students' behavior. A way to combat that preconceived notion from the downtown community is to create a bond between the college and the community in which it is located.

In towns that offer a stronger ambiance of being a "college town", the school is treated as a central aspect of the town. Residents use the open parklike atmosphere of the campus, and it impacts the town aesthetically. Despite issues residents may have with living in a "college town", many cities seek to acquire universities. Jobs, stability, and cultural opportunities are all benefits typically cultivated from having a college.

Colleges such as North Dakota State University and the University of Massachusetts have contributed to integrating their downtown community with the college community by opening downtown locations for certain programs. Business programs and art programs thrive in such areas. This creates a physical bond between the college and the city. The university could benefit by utilizing this approach. City's downtown community could also benefit from increasing local traffic to these areas.

Gordon College, located in Barnesville, Georgia, has researched and implemented a way to engage the community and help create a partnership-like bond with the college. Their purpose was to establish collaborations between the college, municipal leaders, and

private citizens. (Weill, 2009) and in doing so they wanted to benefit both the town and the institution economically and culturally. They first identified and created a committee. The committee included stakeholders, college staff and administration, community leader, and a team of people who oversaw media. Their committee identified a specific goal: healing and developing beneficial town-grown relationships. Their committee worked with an arboretum committee to create a more welcoming outdoor environment on campus that the community would enjoy. They developed an international speakers' series that interested both the college and city communities. The steps they took worked in their favor thanks to the president's dedication and passion for building a bridge between the two communities. Action needs to be taken from both sides in order to form these positive relationships, but the university needs to be particularly engaging.

How does a local government turn creative and cultural work into policy and action? This is another issue that needs to be addressed. A strategic plan can only take a group so far if no one is willing to implement the strategy itself. There are many concepts and strategies that we can identify as being the best option for downtown area, such as the conventional model, the creative city model, the cultural industries model, the cultural occupations model, and the cultural planning model (Godrich, 2013). The research on this topic has provided specific advice for each method and how useful it would be for a type of government.

The conventional model follows more traditional cities like Dallas, Cincinnati, and Cleveland. The model is descriptive of having just exactly what a city needs to thrive without much room for extra amenities. For a city like the one we studied, the creative city model may be the best. Due to the models' flexibility and broadness, it gives the local government more room to work by basing cultural needs, which our local city does not yet offer in its downtown district. In this model, there are no set guidelines for adding a certain type of

8

attraction, although most cities, which have dealt with this problem have implemented the same types of buildings or attractions. The downtown area already has a few of these buildings and attractions, which leads to another concern that needs to be investigated and fixed; marketing what is down there and how effective transportation can be a bolster in itself to guiding us in the right direction to vibrant city life.

Development Strategy

This cultural development strategies have worked in the past in many towns across the United States. It is of extreme importance that if innovative ideas were to be implemented, there is a strong strategy to back the ideas. When cultural development is discussed, it usually centers around adding museums, art districts, small venues for performers, cultural restaurants/bars, and other entertainment ventures. The downtown does have most of this, but how to implement this into a direct strategy for populating these venues is what needs to be explored.

Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris (2007) discuss larger cities with more urban culture, although that may not apply to a smaller place like our local city due to constraints like location and demographics. However, the general ideas still may apply, and there is a room for improvement. According to Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris, city boards do look into developing culture and entertainment, effectively bringing in more residents and tourists to improve the city image and help in resolving the problem of boredom (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007). This means that cities take a focused approach to residents and some tourism by improving city image and quality-of-life enhancements, which is more than attainable for a city like the one we studied. They also note that developmental agencies keep residents in mind more than the national eyes (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007). Taking a local approach is a direct strategy to develop residential support. The local city has no choice but to take a local approach since it is not part of a large metropolis.

According to the findings of the study, rejuvenating the downtown community necessitates efforts from students, the downtown community, the government, and the university. The city appears attractive and accommodating to the student community through distinctive shared activities in the downtown community, boosting integration between students and the community, which is critical to the city's revitalization.

The university on the other hand, would promote student-host community integration by encouraging students to investigate options such as internships and restaurants in the downtown area. All of these strategic actions will considerably accelerate integration between the two communities in order to improve their relationship; eliminate student ennui for optimal performance; increase economic activity; and grow the downtown economy in order to create a mutually beneficial relationship.

Previous study has mostly focused on the impact of educational institutions on economic growth via technology transfer, with little attention paid to universities' contributions to the development of surrounding communities. Public universities are reliable assets that not only assist local economies but also socially and politically revitalize communities (Breznitz & Feldman, 2012).

Higher education institutions have played an important role in neighborhood revitalization in many cities, particularly in areas near to universities and colleges. It is frequently argued that if urban universities can positively impact their surrounding neighborhoods, they will improve their institutional image, the image of the city in which they are located, recruit more and better students, and attract more research grants, contracts, and charitable donations. (Bromley & Kent, 2011).

METHODS

The method we used to conduct our research was through a survey. The questions were carefully defined and molded over time until we were satisfied with what we were trying to get out of this survey. The data came

from college students. The data that we collected was intended to show us how the university students feel about downtown area, and how we can incentivize integration between the two aspects.

Our questions were defined by our firsthand experiences, beliefs and perceptions of downtown area. The survey was measured by the student's perception, considering where they originate from and what they value about the downtown. Integration is another topic that we intended the survey to analyze, which has been addressed through figuring out how active the students are within the downtown culture, and what activities or events excite them in which they could become more involved.

We have analyzed the responses for finding out what the general opinion of downtown area is according to the university students and how important they feel that it is to have a thriving downtown. University students were asked how positively they contribute to downtown and how positively downtown contributes to the college. Lastly, we tried to find out how well students are informed about the opportunities that downtown area has accessible to them and how we could increase awareness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Surveys are spread out to college students at a university in a small Midwestern city and we received 120 completed surveys. We were enthusiastic about the diversity of students who participated in our study. Of the 120 responses, 30% came from students who were originally from local city, 26% came from students from somewhere else within the state, 22% came from students that were originally from somewhere else in the country besides the state, and 17% were from international students. Five percent of our participants preferred not to answer. To simplify our data analysis and to ensure adequate sample sizes for quantitative analyses, we created two groups based on responses. Group 1 consisted of students from city (30%) combined with students from the state (26%) which we shall

name "In State" vs. students from out of the state (22%) combined with students from out of country (17%) which we labeled "Out of State".

The starting point in our research was to find out what the overall perception of downtown area is for college students. We asked them to respond with their general perception of the downtown area. The average answer on a 5-point scale from the "In State" group was 3.62 while the average from the "Out of State" was 3.36. The difference was significant at $p < 0.5$. Using the same scale, students were asked how important a thriving downtown is to a community. Results from the two "In State" vs. "Out of State" groups were insignificant (Table 1).

Table 1. *Perception and Importance of Downtown Area to the University Community.*

Sample	Mean
Perception "In State"	3.62
Perception "Out of State"	3.36
Significant?	$p < 0.5$
Importance "In State"	4.42
Importance "Out of State"	4.45
Significant?	Not significantly different

Since our project can help enhance town-university relationships, the fact that both groups considered a thriving downtown to be an important aspect of a community is helpful. It may be that university students would be attracted to new improvements and events.

Our second goal was to identify whether students consider whether university students contribute to the downtown community and why they feel that way. Of the college students that we surveyed, 55% either agreed or strongly agreed that the university contributes positively to the local community. People who responded with "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" were asked to give reasons why they feel that way. We categorized the responses into three groups: events, the arts, and diversity as represented in Figure 1.
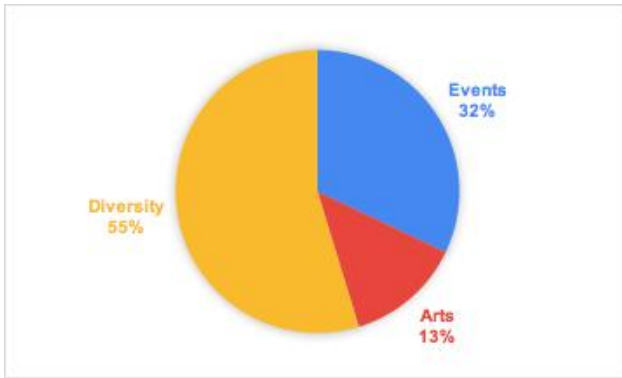
Figure 1. How does the university positively contribute to the community?

Answers that were placed in the "Events" category identified positive feelings towards events that involve the entire university community. Sporting events, fundraising events, and other recreational events were mentioned. The key element in the responses were that the college brings the community together by including everyone.

For those who feel that the university positively contributes to the local culture through the arts, they valued the creativity and involvement of artistic expression. They placed a value in vibrancy of a community and felt strongly that art exhibits, theatre performances, musical events, and even art classes make a community better.

By knowing what the university students value in a community, we are able to understand what they would like to see happening in the downtown area. Over half of the students surveyed (55%) told us that the university contributes positively to the community by bringing a diverse population to our town. It is evidenced by the data we collected that a diversified community is important and makes people feel welcome. We were curious how welcome those people from diverse backgrounds actually felt in downtown area.

We used "In State" and "Out of State" once again to generate the next analysis. The question we asked was: *I feel welcomed when I visit downtown businesses.* We found that the mean of how "In State" students answered was 4.08; while, "Out of State" students had an average answer of 3.55. A t-test revealed that our data was significantly different at $p < 0.001$. There was a high variance between the answers from each group. We can conclude a significant difference in how welcoming "In State" students feel compared to "Out of State" students.

Based on our findings pertaining to what the university students value about the local community, we would like to conclude that it would be very beneficial if the downtown area held more events that are open to the whole community and welcoming of university students. It is especially important to hold events that include the diverse population of people who are from out of state or from a country abroad not unlike military appreciation events. These events can be run in the same way the university holds the international cultural events. What events would be successful? We asked students what they would like to see more of in the downtown area.

The university students that we surveyed were most interested in seeing more live music/ concerts (69%), local restaurants (62.5%), farmers' markets (57.5%), shopping/ retail (52.5%), and food trucks (50%). Although restaurants and retail stores take longer than the other top choices to put into action, it is good insight into what would attract more people downtown. Food trucks would be a terrific way to integrate local businesses with the university students. One reason would be that it would be convenient to park a food truck on campus. Not only would it bring the local community to the campus, but it would generate business and hopefully positive feelings towards the community in general. As far as events go, live music and concerts would be a great idea.

Although our data showed that most college students are fairly neutral about our downtown community, it also showed us insight into how we can improve those feelings. We were able to identify what the university students feel unifies a community, and what our downtown could incorporate in order to contribute to it.

Throughout this study regarding the integration of downtown communities and the students at the local university, there were three main research questions discussed. These included "How have other communities connected local university students to the community?" "What are the economic and social benefits for the local city after developing better connections between the university students and the local city?" and lastly, "How can we incentivize university students to visit downtown and make them excited about going there?" These questions were examined through both primary and secondary research.

The first question was explored in our literature review by examining how other communities have been able to connect their downtown community to the rest of the city/university. Some ways discussed include the implementation of students working more in downtown areas, revitalizing the downtown area through construction, and increasing the number of activities and opportunities in the area.

The second question was answered through both secondary and primary research. Through secondary research, we found that the involvement of students through internships and work studies can increase economic and social benefits due to an influx of innovative ideas. In our research, we found that some social benefits of connecting to university pertain to the openness to diversity. In the state in general, areas may be closed off to the idea of diverse populations. The local city may also share a similar view of accepting and integrating diverse populations (or the aversion to doing so). Being open to diversity, can lead to more willingness of diverse students to come downtown and spend their time and money- which would also have an economic benefit.

We feel the third and final question was the most important questions. Making the downtown area exciting and being able to incentivize students to visit downtown, the local city can lead to a healthier, more connected community. Based on our findings pertaining to what university students value about a community, we would conclude that it would be very beneficial if the downtown area held more events and specifically targeted the university students. We asked students what they would like to see more of in the downtown area, and we found that they were most interested in seeing more live music, local restaurants, farmers' markets, stores, and food trucks.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on our analysis of the divergent issues, we would recommend implementing more of what students would be interested in as a way to connect with the communities. Even though additional restaurants and stores would be a more complex course of action, it is good to know they are wanted. One of the easier suggestions to implement would be food trucks. Hosting the food truck festival downtown every other month or every couple of months would be a start to initiate engagement and strengthening ties. By implementing this, it would also increase shopping and more business visits while students are in the area. Live music and concerts would also be a key event to add, even if it were a group of local artists getting together just to have a fun time. One of our final suggestions would be implementing some sort of shuttle service that takes students downtown during these event periods. By doing this, it would help the students without vehicles. With the availability of alternative modes of transportation, they would get more interested in getting downtown, particularly at the time of the events. In conclusion, there is a change that needs to take place in order to connect the university and the downtown community. With a beginning to improve the collaboration between the university and the community could be the beginning of the revitalization of the city as well as the nearby areas, as a test case for small university - cities as well as for such communities elsewhere.

Through an integrative organizational structure, future study should look into community/university student partnerships

12

through interdisciplinary outreach and participation as well as service-learning, universities can contribute design, planning, economic development, and other ideas, concepts, and policies to promote sustainable development. According to (Laninga, et al. 2011) from soliciting people' thoughts and aspirations to producing architectural concepts and draft planning papers, students play an important role in community university cooperation. Students prepare for their service-learning experiences before even stepping foot in a community. The relationship between colleges and their surrounding communities is commonly referred to as "town and gown." (Hatcher, Hammond, & Meares, 2020). Universities and colleges act as innovation and research hubs, bringing together public, commercial, and nonprofit institutions in ways that benefit local economies and strengthen state and local governance.

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