

Equipping Students to Address Wicked Problems in Rural Communities:  
The Development of a Rural Scholars Program

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## Introduction/Need for Innovation of Idea

In Fall 2019, the Vice-President for Research (VPR) at [State] University disseminated a *Call for Proposals* to faculty to develop teams and submit ideas for conducting multidisciplinary research that might positively impact people living in [State]. From this *Call*, the Rural Renewal Initiative (RRI) team was formed with the idea of identifying and solving the wicked problems facing rural communities in [State] and beyond per Research Priority 6 (Graham, Arnold, & Jayaratne, 2016-2020). Rural communities suffer from growth migration, dilapidation of antiquated infrastructure, underfunded and underperforming school systems, and insufficient medical and health care facilities (NCLS, 2020). However, what rural communities suffer from most often is a lack of overall leadership and leadership capacity to infuse new ideas and make decisions (Hastings, Wall, & Mantonya, 2018). Higher education should play a role in the development of leadership in rural places (Astin & Astin, 2000; Hastings et al., 2018). One way to develop leaders is through a serviship experience (Hastings et al., 2018). “Service-learning and professional internships, separately, have been identified as vehicles for preparing young adults for leadership roles” (Hastings et al., 2018, p. 141). Serviships combine a variety of ideas suggested by Kuh (2008) as being necessary for high-impact learning in the college classroom.

## How It Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

The proposal submitted by the RRI initiative team was selected as one of the four internal projects supported by the VPR’s office at Oklahoma State University. Specifically, the team identified two of the poorest counties in Oklahoma and developed the Rural Scholars Program, which includes a serviship component, to address these problems. The Rural Scholars Program was designed around the study abroad phenomenon where students are provided an experience (i.e., in this case, a 10-week serviship opportunity) in one of the two identified counties in southwest Oklahoma. Specifically, Rural Scholars will: 1) work on a research or student project identified through a needs assessment and headlined by an Oklahoma State University faculty member, and 2) assist local civic leaders in the community regarding revitalization projects. To recruit Rural Scholars, the RRI team submitted an electronic *Call for Applications* to college advisors, printed up and tacked flyers to bulletin boards across campus, and verbalized the program through word-of-mouth. Once identified, students were encouraged to enroll in a 16-week course titled, *Developing Rural Scholars for Civic and Community Engagement*. The course was developed to serve as preparation for students’ 10-week serviship experience. Similar to a study abroad program where students learn about the culture, customs, currency exchange, food, and other important components of the country they are visiting prior to traveling abroad, students in the *Developing Rural Scholars* course were provided a rich overview of similar issues regarding the two counties identified and chosen by the team. The following four objectives framed the course:

- 1) Define the various community capitals [human, social, spiritual, built, natural, political, and financial] and their purposes within rural areas;
- 2) Identify the various local assets, art, and culture necessary to enacting change within a rural community;
- 3) Collect and use data to identify and solve problems in rural settings;
- 4) Conceptualize transformative opportunities to renew rural communities. (Robinson, 2020, p. 2)

## Results to Date/Implications

The course was taught to 10 students in the Spring 2020 semester. The demographic makeup of the course was unique in that it consisted of four freshmen, one sophomore, one junior, three masters students, and one PhD student. The course met weekly on Thursdays from 12:30 to 3:20 pm (Central Standard Time). Each week, students learned theory and discussed the text assigned the week before. In addition, they heard first-hand from a guest speaker who were conducting impactful work in rural places around the world that complements the text. Guest speakers consisted of a director of a NGO in Haiti, an executive director of a non-profit in Afghanistan, a director of a rural development institute in Nebraska, faculty and a superintendent from an early-college school in Texas, local leaders in the rural counties identified by the initial grant team, and local Oklahoma State University faculty. In addition, a portion of the course each week was devoted to allowing students to work in groups to develop questions, conduct research, and brainstorm solutions to the wicked problems that exist in these rural communities. The hope is that the course was developmental to the Rural Scholars who will be living and working in these counties in Summer 2020. Specifically, 11 Rural Scholars were selected to participate in a servicership opportunity in Summer 2020. Unfortunately, not every Rural Scholar was able to enroll in the course and not every student in the course was interested or able to serve as a Rural Scholar.

#### Future Plans/Advice

Students in the course were required to participate in various assignments related to the projects they will be involved with in Summer 2020. Examples consisted of developing an engagement plan (i.e., their plan for engaging the community to rally around improving the community's capitals), logic model, mini grant proposal, and a community branding plan. After completing the course, students will physically relocate to one of the two counties and begin their 10-week servicership between June 1 to August 1, 2020. The RRI team has made placement decisions and informed the Rural Scholars of the project they will be working and the county they will be living this summer. Because servicership opportunities appear to work best when interns can live with members from the local community (Hastings et al., 2018), the RRI team is working with the county Extension educators to identify and secure living arrangements for "in-home stays" (Hastings et al., 2018, p. 148) for the servicership experiences.

#### Costs/Resources Needed

The servicership program is possible because of the internal funds associated with the VPR's initiative. Each Rural Scholar will receive a \$5,000 stipend for their 10-week commitment. The RRI team hopes that the communities chosen will help offset living expenses by allowing students to live free of charge. The RRI team will oversee the Rural Scholars and the various projects this summer and work with community citizens who have been selected as mentors to the Rural Scholars. It is expected that the individual communities will purchase and provide any and all materials (i.e., trash bags, gloves, computers and printers, vehicles) necessary to accommodate the Rural Scholars' efforts during their servicership experience. To obtain this commitment, the RRI team has made multiple trips to these counties and has invested numerous hours of planning the program and its details to ensure a successful experience for both the communities and the Rural Scholars.

## References

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