



# Putting community first in community-engaged teaching

*Jane Rogan, Sustaining Hoosier Communities Director  
Indiana University Center for Rural Engagement*

*Spring 2021*

What is community-engaged teaching, and why does it matter? For decades, college campuses have launched and grown service-learning and community-engaged teaching programs in an effort to bridge the town-gown divide and prepare students for careers after graduation. While these university-community projects undoubtedly benefit students<sup>1</sup> in linking their coursework with practice, how can we ensure that substantial benefits are also delivered to the community?

After coordinating more than 50 engaged learning courses over four years as part of the Center for Rural Engagement's Sustaining Hoosier Communities (SHC) program, I believe we have some insights into this question.

SHC puts the primary focus on the community first. We build partnerships with diverse community representatives of all ages and at all stages of life—high school students, elected officials, retirees, educators, health and mental health practitioners, business owners, and concerned citizens. And we give these residents a chance to share their concerns, hopes, and dreams for their community.

We engage in an Asset-Based Community Development process where we ask community members to share their strengths, talents, and abilities on which we can build. Along with our community-based volunteer coordinators we develop an Appreciative Inquiry question—a question that focuses on a positive future—to frame our partnership. This framing question asks community members to develop ideas for student work that build on existing strengths and fulfill an aspirational vision for the community.

## Asset-based community development

### Five core principles:

1. Asset-based
2. Place-based
3. Relational
4. Working inclusively
5. Citizen-led



With the framing question in mind, we next ask residents to tell us exactly how they want to start moving towards that desired end state. They can imagine any kind of project, as long as they adhere to one rule: each project idea must build on an asset that currently exists in the community. This asset-based approach locates the county's growth potential within its own capacities—it seeks nothing from external entities. This process takes residents away from a deficit mindset—one that all humans are prone to fall into—and instead asks them to reimagine and repurpose their strengths and capabilities.

In my experience there is incredible power in these asset-based and appreciative processes. They allow residents to remember the things they treasure in their communities. They can imagine a future that includes resources that are familiar and leveraged in new ways. And the process generates significant community pride.

SHC offers support to both faculty and community partners to lay the groundwork for a successful relationship. SHC staff arrange meetings between faculty and community partners, we help community partners and faculty members develop shared expectations and outcomes for each project, and we support community partners when participating with classes as the de facto expert representing their community.



## SHC partners with Washington County, IN

With a population of 28,036, residents and tourists alike enjoy the recreational and cultural resources of Washington County. Through an asset-based community development approach, community leaders partnered with IU faculty and students to identify projects ranging from exploring agritourism models to increasing performing arts opportunities.

The coursework itself is a straightforward aspect of the Sustaining Hoosier Communities model. The community project-lead and the faculty agree upon the deliverables that will be presented at the end of each semester. Student projects often help propel community-driven work on a specific topic—the community takes the lead to carry on the work initiated in the classroom. Because of this, there's no real finish line for SHC's work with a community. SHC continues to work with our community partners over time, following up on projects that the community prioritizes.

Assessment of our university-community partnership demonstrates a high level of student, faculty, and community partner satisfaction. Our community partners often say that they are surprised by the strong quality of student work, and that the interaction with students in the classroom was one of their favorite parts of the partnership. The real-world nature of SHC projects and the passion of community members motivates the students to perform well and helps them prepare for careers after graduation.

Some might see the work of SHC as taking students and university assets on the road. I look at it differently. To me, the primary purpose of SHC is to build trust within a community by showing up and being a reliable and relatable partner. If we do that well, the gaps between the community and the classroom narrow, and we ensure the highest likelihood of a successful outcome for everyone.

### References

<sup>1</sup>Carini, R. M., Kuh, G.D., and Klein, S. P. 2006. "Student Engagement and Student Learning: Testing the Linkages." *Research in Higher Education*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Feb. 2006), pp. 1-32