

# Realizing Regional Resilience: Appalachian Bridges to the Future

Arman Hoseyni, Edwin Coffman, Gabby Payne, Jenna Vangellow, Julia Ferri, Kerry Lyons, Lauren Taylor, Lindsey Golden, Maddy Hoestermann, Tracey Ly Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, University of Pittsburgh

## PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

**The University of Pittsburgh in Fayette County**  
As the inaugural group for Pitt's work with the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Appalachia Teaching Project, we wanted to begin by creating an asset map for Fayette County, Pennsylvania, an economically distressed county about an hour outside of the city of Pittsburgh.

Our main goal was to create a lasting and positive relationship with the members of the Fayette County community and its leaders. This will allow us to progress our research in the future to address economic development and the brain drain phenomenon.

Through community-based research and collaborations with the directors of the Fayette County Cultural Trust and Connellsville Redevelopment Authority, we were able to create an **asset map** for the county.

## RESEARCH ON CONNELLSVILLE AND ASSET MAPPING

### **What is an asset map?**

An asset map identifies individuals, groups, and community assets in an area so that they can be used to enable further community development.

### **Why create an asset map?**

- **Synergy**- businesses and organizations are more resilient when they work together and focus their individual strengths into collaborative projects
- This asset-based approach empowers a **strong and sustainable** community by encouraging self-reliance and political efficacy
- Directly involves the community by engaging with residents of the community to better understand what **they** find important and beneficial within their community
- Ultimately fosters a **results-driven approach** which replaces the historically predominant (and largely ineffective) approach of focusing only on problems or deficits

### **How did we find our assets?**

- Preliminary research through internet searches and speaking with **Daniel Cox and Michael Edwards** of the Fayette County Cultural Trust
- **Visiting Connellsville** and conversing with local business owners and community members about **their favorite aspects of the town and what they think could help improve it**

## PROBLEMS THAT FAYETTE COUNTY AND CONNELLSVILLE FACE

### **Economic Underdevelopment**

- Formerly a county and town that was booming from coal and coke industry
- Endured land exploitation and outmigration after economic growth from industrial era
- Business **closures**
- **Lack of business variety**
- **Shortage of job and economic opportunities**
- **Few consumers** of local businesses

### **Brain Drain Phenomenon**

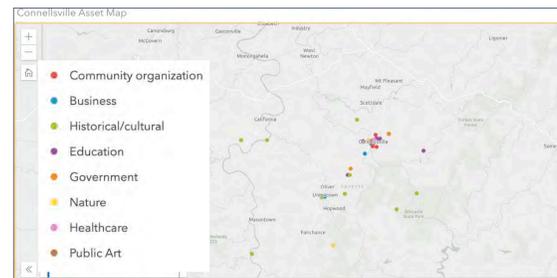
- The **outmigration of higher educated or skilled individuals** from one region to another due to lack of opportunities
- Encouragement to get out of rural towns for better opportunities is largely prevalent
- Young individuals move out of Fayette County for higher education and **tend to not return**
- **Huge shortage of job and social opportunities, and affordable housing** outside of familial homes



Image of store fronts in Downtown Connellsville, PA

## FINDINGS FROM COMMUNITY

- Desire to have a plethora and wide variety of businesses and stores in town centers
- More opportunities for business ventures and social gatherings for younger individuals
- Closure of gap between generations of community members to improve cohesion in towns and regions
- Better communication between tourist accommodations, restaurants, businesses, and employees



**Our asset map of Fayette County and Connellsville, PA.** Including the categories that we found most important in the county: community organizations, businesses, historical/cultural entities, education and government institutions, natural landmarks, healthcare providers, and public art.

## POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

### **Short-term Solutions**

- Business grants
- Business partnerships
- Increase utilization of the Internet and social media platforms for business growth

### **Mid-term Solutions**

- Main Street Revitalization
- Beautification through uplifting homegrown artistic
- Community programs to increase social media literacy
- Utilizing local venues to engage younger individuals

### **Long-term Solutions**

- Bring energy industry back through wind farms
  - Would bring new jobs and preserve beauty of local nature and resources
- Expand public transit from bigger cities to more rural areas
  - Ex) From Pittsburgh to Connellsville, Uniontown to Connellsville, etc.
- Increasing access to healthcare and higher education opportunities
- Creating more affordable housing options for younger individuals looking to move back to Appalachia



Image of Connellsville Italian Independent Club. The artwork was commissioned in part by the Fayette County Cultural Trust.

Painting done by artist Jeremy Raymer, completed in 2019.



Photo overlooks the Youghiogheny River in front of Connellsville's Visitor Center along the GAP trail.

Photo was taken by Jenna Vangellow during Pitt's first visit to Connellsville



Connellsville Gateway Arch- Great Allegheny Passage Trail  
Made with glass from Connellsville's own Youghiogheny Opalescent Glass Factory

## NEXT STEPS

- **Project is a 10-year partnership**
- **The next set of students will expand upon what was accomplished this semester**
- **Continue building trust between University of Pittsburgh and Connellsville**
- **Reach out to other communities in Fayette County to expand our asset map**
- **Work with Uniontown, PA, to connect with them and establish relationship with their community**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Appalachian Teaching Project for giving us the opportunity to start this research at Pitt.

We would also like to thank the University of Pittsburgh Honors College Global and Experiential Programs, the Fayette County Cultural Trust, our team of advising faculty, the community of Connellsville, PA, and everyone that has supported this research experience thus far.

## KEY REFERENCES

- Fayette County Cultural Trust- Daniel Cox and Michael Edwards
- Hansen SB, Ban C, Huggins L. Explaining the "Brain Drain" from Older Industrial Cities: The Pittsburgh Region. Economic Development Quarterly. 2003;17(2):132-147.
- Jakes, s. et al. (2015) Engaging community change: the critical role of values in asset mapping. Community Development 46(4) 392-406.
- Peresie, Jennifer L. et al. "The Undergraduate Perspective on Community-Based Research." Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning9 (2003): 36-43.
- Petrin RA, Farmer TW, Meece JL, Byun SY. Interpersonal competence configurations, attachment to community, and residential aspirations of rural adolescents. J Youth Adolesc. 2011 Sep;40(9):1091-105

