Learning Through Community

SUMMER 2005 :: NENA-RIT Partnership
INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2005, ten students, three faculty, and one project coordinator from Rochester Institute of Technology participated in a unique community-based learning experience. An outgrowth of RIT’s partnership with the NorthEast Neighborhood Alliance (NENA), a resident-driven community planning and revitalization initiative, this ten-week experience brought together an interdisciplinary team of faculty and students from environmental science, business, public policy, and multidisciplinary criminal justice who worked with neighborhood leaders on a variety of projects connected to the implementation of the NENA Strategic Neighborhood Action Plan. This experience resulted in the formation of a unique learning community as students and faculty learned from neighborhood leaders and as neighborhood leaders utilized the unique expertise of RIT faculty and students. Through a weeklong orientation, weekly discussion/reflection sessions, and regular planning meetings, these participants formed a genuine learning community in which each participant assumed the role of teacher-learner.

Although each student who worked during the summer worked on a variety of projects as diverse as business planning and environmental education, everyone volunteered several hours a week at the Vineyard, a 2.6 acre garden that is part of NENA’s urban agriculture program. The time in the gardens proved to be the richest of all the summer activities. Through their work in the Vineyard, RIT students had an opportunity to learn about the NENA history while simultaneously learning the lessons of community building and community change through the voices and experiences of neighborhood leaders. Students were required to maintain journals to record their reflections on their work and to keep track of the work accomplished. These journals were shared with faculty and community leaders, who engaged in a written dialogue with individual students in addition to group discussions.

This report, also produced by RIT students, provides an overview of some of the several activities students worked on during the summer of 2005 and offers some insight into the student perspective on this unique learning experience. For more information on all that was accomplished during the summer of 2005, please go to www.rit.edu/servicelearning.
Over the summer, RIT and the NENA collaborated on an Environmental Education and Urban Agriculture project. This project was headed by Peter Mulroy, an Environmental Science graduate student.

Pete's project involved working with the NENA on "constructing and testing a pilot curriculum" for the new Agricultural Education Center. At this time, the center is under construction; groundbreaking occurred on July 20, 2005. The new Agricultural Education Center will be located at the Vineyard.

The Environmental Education project is meant to increase community awareness and appreciation of urban agriculture and the ways in which it relates to an urban area's ecology. Pete was responsible for designing the pilot curriculum for the Agricultural Education Center. Working with public policy students Deb Lawrence and Alex Synnik, leaders within the neighborhood were interviewed, and a total of twenty surveys were given to area youth who had been hired to work at the Vineyard during July and August.

Pete notes that "My partners in this project, Alex and Deb, were a source of inspiration. Alex and Deb taught me how to design, conduct and analyze [data from] interviews and surveys. More than that however, they [were] invaluable in keeping me focused and motivated."

Pete's work with the NENA-RIT Partnership has been ongoing, as a part of his Masters Degree research. The Partnership and the urban agriculture program combined two of his interests: education and urban ecology. The Environmental Education program from the summer "fit these two interests remarkably well. It all came together in an amazing...way."

"For Pete, he "project is the most interesting, purposeful, and fulfilling thing I have ever been a part of at RIT. It enhanced my experience because it allowed me to pursue my academic and career interests, while working within a community (that) is committed to sustainability."

Pete also has an opportunity to assist with the planning and documentation of the building of the Agricultural Education Center. This work evolved into a close working relationship with Mr. Robert Vickers, the project manager. A long time community activist and veteran of the civil rights movement, Mr. Vickers is a construction manager by profession. As Pete observed, Mr. Vickers "...is an awesome individual and has taught me things that I could not have learned had I not met him."

With his experience working with the NENA being so positive, Pete "hope[s] that future RIT students will look to this community partnership as a place where they can extend their classroom education to something much more meaningful."

Through the NENA-RIT Partnership, both the community and the RIT students benefit greatly. As Pete notes, I cannot over-emphasize how much it has meant to me to be involved in a project like this. The community receives the support it needs to improve and grow, while students come away with invaluable experience that can only be gained outside the classroom."
Environmental Science students Cindy Lui and Blair Brown teamed up on three major projects during their summer with the NENA-RIT Partnership. For the first project, Professor of Environmental Management Technology Josh Goldwitz, Blair and Cindy headed up a team of students on a phytoremediation project, a process of using plants to extract contaminants such as arsenic or lead from soil. The team mainly worked with ferns that extract arsenic and mustard plants that extract lead from the soil. Plants were grown both in the lab, to serve as a control, and in the Vineyard. The phytoremediation experiments included two parts: experimenting with various soil types in an attempt to determine the most efficient way to grow the plants and determining the most efficient spacing patterns for the plants.

According to Cindy this was a wonderful opportunity to "connect with the professor more, and to learn more about the community outside of RIT." She adds that the experience "made me see how much I want to focus [my career] on community sustainability."

The second project the team undertook was a soil analysis project. This involved taking samples of clay and soils from the Vineyard, breaking them down, and then running them through a hydrometer to test the water density. This data was to be used in conjunction with the phytoremediation project.

For Blair, the phytoremediation project was exciting because it allowed her to "use the technical skills [we] learned in the lab in a real life situation...Doing research that directly affected individuals in the Rochester community seemed like a wonderful and new opportunity."

Blair and Cindy also worked with the Partnership on a nutrition project. In order to "help community members and buyers at the Public Market understand the health benefits of the food grown at the Vineyard" Cindy and Blair created a poster explaining the nutritional values of certain produce. They included all of the popular produce grown in the Vineyard, which can be expanded upon as the garden grows. NENA hopes to use this poster to promote GRUB. The poster will be hung at the Public Market for the benefit of the community. Blair also spent some of her time this summer working at the GRUB stand in the Public Market, which she said was "easily my favorite part of the summer."
DEBORAH lawrence & ALEXANDER sytnik
public policy students

Two fourth year Public Policy students, Alex Sytnik and Deborah Lawrence, worked on a broad range of projects during the summer. In addition to helping with some of the lab work on a phytoremediation project, both Alex and Deb worked with Pete Mulloy on the Environmental Education program with GRUB. Alex and Deb were able to assist Pete in tailoring his curriculum by designing surveys and conducting interviews of neighborhood leaders and youth. The team also helped to analyze the results of the interviews. For both students, working on the interviews and the survey were “a wonderful practical application” to all that they have learned in classes. They found that “it’s one thing sitting in class, interviewing a fellow student and another thing entirely interviewing community members.”

A second project Alex took on involved archiving historic references for NENA. An effort has been undertaken to preserve NENA’s written documents both for future reference and for historical purposes. Over the summer Alex began organizing many of these documents. Soon he partnered with Nick Petitti, a graduate student in the Multidisciplinary Studies criminal justice program. The documents were stored in several boxes, and Alex and Nick had a large job of sorting documents and scanning ahead of them. The document inventory also involved summarizing the various papers for fast and easy future reference. Viewing the documents gives a feel for the history of the community, allowing interested individuals to trace the activities of community organizations, as well as community decisions. Working on this “helps you to see the community at large, not just the part related to your project,” says Alex. In addition to the inventory and preservation of documents, Alex also continues to work on archiving the extensive volume of photographs and video footage of the community. The images are of great historical value, in some cases documenting important community events, such as the development of new owner-occupied housing and the recent groundbreaking for the Agricultural Education Center.

Eventually community members will be able to access the document databases once the information is compiled and saved through a community website. The community goal is to establish a Neighborhood Information Center, where these documents and other information of value to community organizations and residents can be accessed easily.

Working at the Public Market this summer Deborah noticed that the prices charged for the produce from the Vineyard were not competitive. This discouraged some consumers, who would turn to other booths where produce was significantly less expensive. Deb proposed a study of organic food pricing at local grocery stores and other Public Market booths to help choose a suitable price for the produce grown at the Vineyard. An average was taken of the prices at the various locations and price recommendations were made to community leaders.

Currently, Deb is also working on a health care disparity study with Dr. Bridgette Wiefling of Strong Memorial Hospital and the Jordan Community Health Center. Building on Dr. Wiefling’s previous study using urban resident focus groups, Deb is helping Dr. Wiefling conduct a study to determine the cause of the disparity. The study takes into account restrictive insurance, poor transportation, and the locations of healthcare clinics. After the study concludes, Dr. Wiefling hopes to better inform the public of medical care available to them, the location of clinics which can be used instead of the emergency room, and the requirements for accessing healthcare providers. Information is also collected on healthcare providers, so community members can have a comprehensive list of those serving them and how to contact them.

Deb and Alex both valued this unique learning experience. As Alex notes, “We got to see a lot behind the scenes, and all that goes into a community.” Deb observes that “it’s amazing” to see how hard community leaders work to effectively accomplish all that they do on behalf of the neighborhood.
Spending the summer working on an Oral History project and on a Neighborhood Information Center proved to be an enjoyable learning experience for fourth year Social Work student William Whitefield.

The Oral History project was a continuation of a project begun earlier in the spring of 2005 by a Communities Social Work class. As a member of this class, Will and his classmates worked to record personal narratives of individuals who played an important role in the history of the northeast neighborhoods. By recording the oral history of the neighborhood, the students helped to ensure that the rich history of the neighborhood would not be lost.

Will’s work on the Neighborhood Information Center project has been to “build and host a website that would allow Sector 10 organizations and community members to access data stored in the neighborhood information center database,” such as archive materials Alex Sytnik worked to organize this summer. This project was begun earlier last year, and was ongoing over the summer. The information needs of neighborhood residents were determined through an interview process of both residents and organizational representatives. Making the data available online increases its accessibility not only to neighborhood residents, but to the rest of the Rochester community as well. This data archive will be of great use in future projects and planning as well as creating a good snapshot of the community at any point in time.

Of all the projects Will was involved in over the course of the summer, the moments that stood out the most for him were the times he spent working in the Vineyard alongside the community members and the other RIT students. He also greatly enjoyed the orientation week and the bi-weekly meetings that took place over the summer.” The experience also left Will with an interest in continuing his work with the Partnership. Both of his projects are ongoing, and he continues to work with NENA and other neighborhood organizations in the northeast to satisfy his internship and community research requirements for his Social Work degree. Will shares his excitement about this work by noting “This experience really gave me an understanding of community projects.”
Ben Pfeiffer an MBA student, became involved with the NENA-RIT Partnership through RIT Business Professor Bob Barbato. Ben's primary task this past summer was to assess the small business assistance needs in northeast Rochester and to use this information to determine the feasibility of establishing a small business assistance office as a part of RIT's Small Business Institute, a program of the College of Business.

Through Ben's research with potential partners, RIT was invited to become a part of a pre-existing micro-enterprise small business assistance program, the Action for a Better Community Enterprise (ABC Enterprise).

On his first day at ABC, Ben was able to sit in on a one-on-one consultation between an ABC employee and a community member. Ben soon became engaged and was able to give community members guidance and advice as they went through the process of planning a business. Those coming in for consultations were community members who required help with an already existing business, or those looking for guidance in starting a new venture.

One thing that drew Ben to the NENA-RIT Partnership was the lack of a co-op built into the MBA curriculum. While there is "plenty to learn in the classroom," working with NENA allowed Ben to "think creatively, working with aspiring business owners." One aspect of the Partnership he really enjoyed was that "people come to you with their problems, and then you'd try to make their business better. You really want to do your best for the people, because they really depend on your help and advice."

In addition to his small business consulting work, Ben also had an opportunity to work directly with GRUB by working in the Vineyard and helping with the planning for the construction of the GRUB Agricultural Education Center. In the winter, Ben is planning to take a consulting course which could bring him back to working with the NENA and the Vineyard again. Incorporating inventory controls, and formulating a complete strategic economic plan for the Vineyard is something Ben is looking into working on, as well as developing a formal marketing plan.

Commenting on the Summer experience Ben observed "seeing Alex (originally from Russia, now living in Pittsford) sitting next to Bob Vickers and Shirley Edwards discussing his archiving project, it occurred to me how remarkable it is that a group of students so vastly different than the residents of Sector 10 should come together to support the efforts of the community."
Michael Burkett first became involved with the NENA-RIT Partnership during the summer of 2004. During that summer, Mike worked on preliminary environmental assessments on several parcels of vacant land within northwest Rochester that have been targeted for redevelopment. During the following academic year, Mike worked on mapping the incidence of lead poisoning within the northeast to inform lead abatement efforts. So, when Mike was offered the chance to work on a new project with the Partnership this past summer, he was quick to sign up.

As an Environmental Science graduate student, Mike had the background needed by the community to work on mapping Sector 10's local assets. The mapping project involved recording and mapping neighborhood assets such as healthcare facilities, parks and open spaces, government facilities, and human assets. The assets were identified using input from the community. Due to the nature of the project, Mike spent half his time working in the community, and half working from RIT. Geographic Information System (GIS) data was used extensively in the project, offering Mike a chance to build his practical skills compiling and working with GIS data. This ongoing project allowed Mike to apply the skills he had learned in his classes at RIT in a way that benefited the community and at the same time gave him a better understanding of the application of his knowledge.

Although Mike valued the opportunity to hone his GIS skills, some of his most enjoyable moments were working in the Vineyard with other RIT students and the community members and neighborhood youth. For other students who may be interested in working with the NENA-RIT Partnership, Mike advises that they “should not hesitate talking to NENA members, most love to share information, and there is a lot they can teach you.”

Mike advises that students “should not hesitate talking to NENA members, most love to share information, and there is a lot they can teach you.”