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Comprehensive Exam

Mason County Resource Guide

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## ESSAY 1: CONTEXTUALIZATION

At the beginning of the International Community Development program, I remember arriving in Oxford and being excited to learn and feeling anxious about not knowing what to expect from the program. Although I had researched the program and read the required reading, I was excited to learn more about the program with my cohort. In our lesson on ICD history and core values, the director of the program, Dr. Inslee, introduced us to the concept of contextualization. He explained, “Cultural contextualization is the practice of designing programs and processes with attention to the particular cultural characteristics and inherent resources of a given people, place and time” (Inslee). Additionally, he went on to describe that contextualization was a foundational aspect of the program, and its values reflected “that all cultures are beautiful and worthy of our respect and appreciation, all cultures contain aspects of brokenness, and communities’ culture represents opportunities and resources” (Inslee). Although I already thought cultures and communities had inherent worth and value, one of my goals in joining the program was to help give a voice to those who had been overlooked or were viewed as disadvantaged by their communities. Contextualization requires relationship building and designing solutions from the inside-out by letting the community’s collective voice and strengths direct development.

Community development professionals must respectfully work within the community’s culture and values to achieve progress. In any cultural setting, community developers must build trust and relationships with the community at large. During my fieldwork, I worked throughout multiple parts of West Virginia, but I mainly worked within my home community of Mason County. Although I understood the fundamental practices and values of the community, I needed to be immersed and to listen to multiple voices of stakeholders to better understand the place and

people in the community. By explaining some of the background and context of West Virginia and my fieldwork there, this essay highlights some of the creativity and innovation that went into designing this project and how contextualization practices will be incorporated into this project and my future vocation.

### **Contextualization in West Virginia**

As I previously stated, my desire when I started the International Community Development Program was to help give a voice to those who had been voiceless or viewed as disabled by the community or outsiders. While reading Hofstede's section on cultural relativism in his book, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, I was convicted by the logic that every culture can and should apply judgment to its own activities, because its members are actors as well as observers (25). West Virginia is a prime example of an entire state that is often viewed as disabled in the scheme of development or progress. West Virginia and the Appalachian region are often associated with poverty and have many negative stereotypes that have been perpetuated by the media. Multiple people focus on the harsh stereotypes of Appalachian people and fail to see that the region lives in impoverished, dejected areas far from access to basic necessities such as grocery stores, employment opportunities, or quality healthcare (Cooke-Jackson and Hanson 187). Although the entire state faces these barriers, rural counties are especially vulnerable because they do not have established resources or support networks.

When I began my fieldwork, my main question centered around capacity building and how resources and support networks could be used to create opportunities for disadvantaged and disabled communities within Appalachia. In order to examine this, I had to first practice contextualization by developing a better understanding of the culture and practices that currently

existed in the community. In the book, *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*, authors William Schumann and Rebecca Adkins Fletcher seek to explore contextualization in Appalachia by exploring place and placemaking in an attempt to understand the cultural landscape of Appalachia through several short stories. A premise of one of the studies included in the book is the statement made in a West Virginia community center that “No one’s ever been here, and no one’s ever talked to us before” (213). This statement is not just indicative to the study in the book but to the attitudes of many West Virginians. Many West Virginians feel that no one cares about their feelings or thoughts because no one has engaged them in the development process or asked their opinions on their community.

In John Bryant’s book, *How the Poor Can Save Capitalism*, he writes, “we step into a minefield of perspective and controversy when we say we set out to radically reimagine the solution to poverty” (3). Minefield is a fitting word to describe West Virginia both because of the state’s relationship with coal mining and how it can feel to operate within the culture if you are trying to move too fast or operate without the community. Culturally, West Virginians are hesitant to change and fear that they will be judged and looked down on by outsiders. The feeling of being disenfranchised is not a new feeling for West Virginian communities. West Virginian communities have struggled with power distance, which “is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, “Cultural Dimensions”). Although the United States as a country has comparatively low power distance score, West Virginian communities would have a higher score because they are aware of the undistributed power and inequality that exists in multiple sectors of the state and local communities. This power division has often left West Virginia communities feeling powerless and guarded.

When designing and implementing programs, contextualization helps the community developer understand why the community operates in a specific way and helps give insight into what motivates the community. Similarly, it is important to know the community's strengths and vulnerabilities. In his book, *Walking with the Poor Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Myers examines essential development questions, "What better future? What are the goals of transformation? What is the process of change? What is sustainability? In what ways do we need to think holistically?" (Myers 173). His questions are examples of the insights we seek to find when we engage in cultural contextualization and create ideas out of the community's vision for development.

### **Contextualization Applied in My Project**

During my fieldwork experience with the Career Connections program in West Virginia, I embraced the opportunity to practice contextualization within Mason County. I interviewed many Career Connections program participants who are young adults with barriers in the community and stakeholders who are involved in community organization. Interviewing and community observation ultimately led to designing a project based out of community desire and need. While creating my project proposal, I sought to listen to the needs of the community and let the knowledge I had gathered direct the project. In *Creative Confidence*, Kelley and Kelley approach project planning and designing with action in mind. They encourage readers to develop a "do something" mindset (115). The "do something" mindset comes from the desire to spark positive change in the world and encourages people to optimistically experiment and "to transition their actions into deeds, rather than just passively observing" (Kelley and Kelley 115-118). This is what I tried to do with my county-specific resource guide, which seeks to create a

place where essential community information can be freely accessed in a centralized location, both online and in person.

In his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam explains, “social capital refers to the connections among individuals' social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. The first known use of social capital was used by a rural school supervisor in West Virginia and explained how growing closer to your neighbors and community improved the well-being of the whole community” (19-20). Similarly, West Virginians are known for being neighborly and loyal, so the connections or social capital and relationships that they establish within the community are critical. While trust is an essential component of any relationship, West Virginians put a heavy emphasis on this culturally because of the treatment they have experienced in the past. The former mistreatment of communities by industries or “outsiders” have left strong insecurities and fear surrounding change and uncertainty. This fear of judgement and “outsiders” has created a psychological struggle that Appalachians must fight tooth and nail to fight against to let others in (Beck 140). This fear of change has led to a higher level of uncertainty avoidance. Author Anne Fadiman portrays “meeting Hmong like getting into a speakeasy: everything depends on who sent you” (97). The same could be said about West Virginians. If the idea or innovative solution is suggested by someone the community trusts or knows, they will be more willing to accept or listen. Because of the cultural hesitancy toward change, I tried to create an innovative solution around an idea that the community was already seeking, rather than proposing a new concept in which they had no context or frame of reference.

Although I am an insider in the community and the county, I have a different worldview and mindset in comparison to many of the program participants I interviewed. I tried to utilize



contextualization through the concept of ‘borrowing the gaze of others’ which is introduced by authors Sunstein and Chriseri-Strater (166). Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater suggest “by looking through the emic perspective and etic perspective at once to locate your own perspective” (166). In other words, by combining my outside perspective with inside perspectives, I am able to look at my county and community through multiple eyes. Many of the participants had reservations about technology and had never travelled out of the county or that state. Participants from more rural areas of the county considered our county seat, Point Pleasant, “the city.” One of my participants during an interview at my office commented, “I’ve only lived in Mason County, but I’m not used to bigger city like this” (Chuck). According to the most recent US Census report, Mason County has a total population of 25,517, and Point Pleasant has 4,146, whereas Chuck lives in area of the county that has under a hundred people (“U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Mason County, West Virginia”). When I asked him about what he’d consider to be a challenge for the area he expressed that although a lack of cell phone service and internet is normal where he lived, “the lack of internet and the cell phone signal and service made it hard to communicate or figure out information” (Chuck). Lack of internet and access to information was a common theme and response that participants listed as a challenge. Lack of internet access was also cited as a hinderance to education by a school principal I interviewed. She explained that limited internet access coupled with many students never having access to a computer before or being raised by grandparents who are unfamiliar with technology was like the blind leading the blind in terms of digital resources or learning (Missy). Although many people listed access to information as a weakness for the county, people were emphasized as a strength.

In my interview with Missy, she listed people as the strongest community resource. She further elaborated by saying “I really think our community supports each other and takes care of

people in general. I mean organizations like the library, or your organization, or schools are all good, but it's the people that make them great. I think we can always get better, but we will have to work together to do that" (Missy). Although she is a principal and a stakeholder, her sentiment of valuing people was echoed in multiple interviews. Although people were listed as a resource and assets throughout the community, the lack of support also left an impact on some of the participants I interviewed.

One in particular is the story of my participant Eric. Eric was nineteen, covered in tattoos, very polite, and had experienced several barriers, but he was motivated to get his life on track and wanted to work. In one of our interviews, he revealed that one of the reasons he wanted to work, aside from money, was it was one thing he knew he was good at doing. He was a man of few words until he warmed up to you, but it was often what he did not say that revealed aspects of his character. He did not have a vehicle, so he walked everywhere. For our first meeting, he walked over eight miles so we could meet and prep for a job interview. Because he was guarded, I had to slowly suggest adaptations like meeting closer, and I worked harder to pay close attention to his mannerisms to unearth what he was thinking or how to offer him resources. The last day I got to work with Eric, I had prepared him and a group of guys to interview for jobs with their hometown, all of the guys wanted to work and pave a new path for themselves. They all received job offers and I conveyed that I was proud of them and they seemed like they were proud of themselves and the opportunity in front of them. Sadly, Eric never made it to work the next morning because he passed away that night. Although this is a heartbreaking story of someone with potential, his life and working with him helped me understand contextualization and how to creatively solve solutions.

The community and county share multiple qualities with Eric. It is tough and rough around the edges. It is made up of hardworking and polite people who are looking for opportunities to improve and are willing to work for them. The community has overcome many barriers and is trying to conquer the barriers in front of it. The community has a hard time asking for help and often their actions speak louder than their words. They value practical and tangible solutions. They are trying to find opportunities and looking for assistance identifying assets that exist locally. They are guarded and if you want to work in the community you have to earn their trust and build relationships. The county has potential, and it is supported by its neighbors. Through working together there is hope for transformation.

In community development class, I was drawn to the Incarnational Training Framework, and encouraged by how the guide speaks to issues like suffering, hope, and how to be a leader that creates renewal in communities. Additionally, I loved the bottom-up theology ITF had and that they recognize that the marginalized and the dispossessed hold the key to transformation (Rocke and Van Dyke 14-15). Much like the communities described by Rocke and Van Dyke, West Virginia and Mason County are experiencing a need for healing and renewal, and my desire was to design a guide that could help build bridges between the powerful and the powerless (13). When I was creating and designing a project for my community, I wanted to develop a practical project that had the potential to help others. In my quest to figure out what this project could be in fieldwork, I realized that multiple members of the community did not know the potential that already existed in the county.

After observing the needs and assets in the community, I decided to design a project with an asset-based approach. Authors Amy Glasmeisser and Tracey Farrigan use their article to discuss asset-based approaches by “suggesting that the Appalachian region needs more

community-based development strategies that broaden the local base of participants and include new groups, citizens, non-governmental organizations, churches, and private funders in planning for development. Assets in this context are not those that focus on the individual but must also transcend to the level of the community, where civic capacity is still underdeveloped” (147). Through listening to the community, engaging local wisdom, and incorporating an asset-based approach through engaging multiple stakeholders in the county, my project seeks to showcase the strengths of the county and broaden the community’s access to resources.

### **Contextualization Applied in My Future Vocation**

Community Development requires practitioners to widen the lens in which they look at the world. While we all have a culture and personal biases, to work in development we need to practice cultural relativism which means “the judging of cultural elements relative to their cultural context and encourages respect for different cultural values, beliefs, and practices” (Menziez 2015). When we are in community with others, we need to build relationships and learn their values and culture. There is not one solution or one framework that can universally be applied to development work. As practitioners it is imperative to adapt methods and let those we work with guide solutions, specifically when it comes to building equity. Contextualization is embedded throughout The Equity Manifesto which speaks to community-building, relationships, and equity by explaining:

It begins by joining together, believing in the potency of inclusion, and building from a common bond. It embraces complexity as cause for collaboration, accepting that our fates are inextricable. It recognizes local leaders as national leaders, nurturing the wisdom and creativity within every community as essential to solving the nation’s problems. It demands honesty and forthrightness, calling out racism and oppression, both overt and

systemic. It strives for the power to realize our goals while summoning the grace to sustain them. It requires that we understand the past, without being trapped in it, embrace the present, without being constrained by it, and look to the future, guided by the hopes and courage of those who have fought before and beside us. This is equity: just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all. (“Equity Manifesto” 2015)

Like the Equity Manifesto, I want to help people and communities realize their worth and potential and be a source of hope. While I do not know where the Lord will call me, through my personal health journey and working in medical missions I realized how valuable rehabilitation is and the impact that can be made on a life by utilizing it. While I see myself eventually working as a rehabilitation professional, I envision being a social justice advocate and involved in community development. Through working in advocacy, I have observed that people who are disabled are ostracized, discriminated against, and treated differently. I empathize and identify with these people since I have faced discrimination after becoming disabled, and it fueled my passion to want to work for and give a voice to others. Experience and observation have emphasized the importance of support networks and community resources for communities and individuals. Support and resources cannot be established without practicing cultural intelligence and cultural relativism. Rehabilitation work requires rebuilding relationships with people and working together to create health goals for themselves and developing tools and techniques to make their lives more functional. In order to work in rehabilitation, advocacy, or community development, I must be culturally aware of myself and know my own values and belief systems, while also being open and flexible to other’s values and worldview. It is important to have

knowledge and understanding of the culture of the people I work with so I can have effective communication and respectfully collaborate with patients and build trust, while also developing treatments that are culturally appropriate and considerate.

### **Conclusion**

Contextualization highlights the unique principles and values of cultures and should be included in community development work. In community development, a practitioner must understand the beliefs and practices of the culture or group before they can successfully work within the community to make positive transformations. Whether I am working in West Virginia or around the globe, understanding the values of those I seek to serve will be essential to the success of the programs I implement.

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## ESSAY 2: QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Many times, when research is discussed, statistics, figures, and analytical data are what people envision. This type of research is referred to as quantitative data. Quantitative data is structural and provides useful and measurable results. While there is nothing wrong with statistics, they only provide a small portion of the whole picture. As community developers, research informs our decisions and encourages action, while emboldening us to learn what drives the community. Qualitative inquiry makes this possible through active listening and learning the values and stories of communities. While both kinds of data are valuable and can be paired together in community development, qualitative data is required to understand the community. Qualitative data is messy and requires community engagement and produces change.

Although qualitative research can have highly structural qualities that are used for the US census or demographical information, when envisioning qualitative research, collecting stories and interviews that have opened ended questions is what comes to mind (Merriam and Tisdell 109). Author and Psychologist Brene Brown demonstrates examples of open-ended discussions in her Ted Talk, “The Power of Vulnerability” when she says, “when you ask people about love, they tell you about heartbreak... when you ask people about belonging, they'll tell you their most excruciating experiences of being excluded” (0:4:05-4:20). Her examples represented how conversations can be messy and how open-ended questions can go in different directions. Qualitative research allowed Brene Brown to wade into the messy topics and let the stories of others redirect her research to find deeper underlying issues. Identifying the deeper root of issues and unearthing how a community operates is one of the strengths of qualitative research.

One way community development practitioners research is learning through stories and listening to the community. Personal stories speak to the hearts of people and the hearts of

communities, so it makes sense that the International Community Development program would select a research method that incorporates stories. Community development practitioners and qualitative researchers are both “interested in understanding how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in their world” (Merriam and Tisdell 15). In order to understand communities and the world, community developers must get to know the community through building trust in their culture. Part of building relationships and getting to know others is talking to them and learning their stories.

Relationships, like research, require time and dedication. Along with learning and collecting community stories, the ICD program values include viewing all cultures with beauty and respect. This requires taking the time to learn a cultural context before engaging it as an outsider which complements the qualitative approach to research. The qualitative approach values cultural sensitivity and assumes “there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (Merriam and Tisdell 9). This requires researchers to observe and note what others may deem ordinary and make the assumption that there are several ways of interpreting events, and in doing so, cross-cultural practitioners can be more open-minded when they approach other cultures. The qualitative approach to inquiry is particularly suited for contextualization because it utilizes both interviews and observations. It also encourages learning and asking questions before making assumptions.

Although asking questions and observing are critical to the qualitative approach, Merriam and Tisdell suggest qualitative researchers “pay special attention to a few things to which others ordinarily give only passing attention” (138). Developing this level of perceptivity is one way we can start gaining pieces of the cultural puzzle that we are observing. Additionally, by studying and learning from the ordinary, we are more likely to notice changes that are already occurring,

and “it is more likely that the researcher will prove to be a catalyst of changes that are already taking place” (Merriam and Tisdell 148). Ultimately this is the goal of researchers and community developers: to join the community in making sustainable changes.

By conducting my research and fieldwork throughout West Virginia’s Workforce Development Career Connections program, I participated in multiple qualitative methods. My fieldwork project proposal serves as a practical example of qualitative research approaches put into action. My project proposal incorporates multiple aspects of qualitative inquiry such as ethnography, participant interviews and observations, participatory action, and program evaluation. Through using my project proposal of a Mason County Resource guide as a case study, the importance of qualitative research approaches and the impact it can have on local communities will be demonstrated.

### **Qualitative Methods Demonstrated in Mason County Resource Guide**

During my fieldwork, my primary research focus was ethnographic study, which required spending time with the culture being studied, first-hand participation and immersion, organization of data, interviews, observations, and personal field notes to explain the researcher’s insights regarding the culture, group and the meanings (Merriam and Tisdell 30). Since I was researching within my own community, I needed to first recognize my own initial biases and viewpoints in order to understand and appreciate other community members’ perspective. I began my fieldwork research seeking to investigate social capital, capacity building, and resource networks in Appalachia, but in order to do that, I needed to look at multiple ways people sought connections.

It is commonly known that my county struggles with finding high speed internet around the county and internet is a topic that comes up in many government and school meetings. While

I believed these accounts, I wanted to understand the geographical landscape of more rural areas of my county first-hand and see if there were any lesser-known spots for internet access that I might discover or observe by actively looking for internet access and cell phone service. I had my own suspicions and biases of which areas of my county were able to connect virtually and I thought I needed to confront my own biases head on and participate in observing my surroundings before starting my interviews, so I started my research by driving throughout my home county and looking for access to Wi-Fi or cell phone service. In engaging in ethnographic mapping, what I discovered was that internet and cell phone service were more limited than I realized. Although my internet access chart was just an initial survey that I wrote on notebook paper, I only found five places that had free access in the county that were open and three of those locations were front rows of parking lots in schools. Although my research was only observing my county, I found similar findings in a study conducted by the Appalachian Regional Commission called “Access in Appalachia: A Primer for Measurement and Decision-Making.”

The study explains:

In an increasingly networked economy, broadband connectivity is critically important to the business community, contributing to increased productivity, competitiveness, and efficiency access to broadband internet is also increasingly being recognized as a prerequisite for people’s access to various other services, such as health care, education, and employment. While only 7% of the United States’ population does not have broadband access in their neighborhoods (25 Mbps download or faster), in rural America this share is 27.4%. Where educational institutions, health care providers, and employers are not sufficiently accessible to people, broadband access can serve as a partial substitute for physical access. (11)

According to authors Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater, “capturing how people view and use their surroundings allows us to not only create a study but also to understand the cultural implications of what’s going on there” (165). By understanding and capturing how people use their surroundings, we gain insight into how space and place affect people and how we can analyze this space from as many angles as possible. This concept became quickly apparent when I started interviewing program participants, especially when space was related to comfort and safety. An example of different views of surrounding space and safety occurred during a fieldwork interview:

During one of my first interviews while I was listening to “Britt,” she shared some personal details with me. She revealed how much she had missed the Workforce office being open and how it made her nervous when it closed down due COVID. While it is natural to be nervous during a pandemic, she revealed that she often hung out in the office and that she would use the computer there to relax since she did not have regular internet at her home. This was a helpful, but surprising insight because the office is mostly known for being the Unemployment office since we are all housed under Workforce WV and it had been closed to public for almost six months before I was able to let her in for an interview.

Knowing the practices and culture of the office and its meaning to program participants and the community at large helped me understand the significance of the office being closed. Due to COVID restrictions, the office has been closed since March and the community are desperate to get inside to receive help. Throughout my fieldwork, people would come to the office and beat on the door and yell trying to get help with their unemployment benefits, resulting in us having to lock ourselves in the office. Although it is hard to ignore people who are trying to get help, we

did not have this capacity because the state controls the county office. However, knowing that the office was regularly used by multiple community members helped establish the importance of the office to the community.

In ethnographic research, language is important, whether it is verbal or nonverbal. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen's book, *Qualitative Methods in Business Research*, "in ethnographic research, language is conceptualized as a social practice: what people say and what they keep silent about produce meaning and value in social life" (151). Although West Virginia and Appalachia are known for being poor and I interviewed primarily low-income individuals, the word low-income or poverty never was used in an interview. Additionally, sometimes nonverbal cues were more telling than the words. For example, in an interview with a participant named "Brice" he was honestly answering the questions, but his hand and leg were shaking when he started talking about himself. I did not address it, but when we transitioned to talking about needs and strengths in the community, he addressed that he was nervous, and he was hoping that the community and job training could help him and that it is difficult to get a job when you have not worked much, and you have a disability. Rather than asking more about his disability, I asked him about what he needed from the community and what resources he thought existed in the county.

Although this is only one example, through conducting interviews and spending less time talking and more time listening to the community around me, it became apparent that many community members were searching for answers and resources, but there wasn't a centralized place or network to look for these answers. During an observation of the Mason County Family Resource Network, many community partners shared struggles of trying to connect with people or having a hard time figuring out when agencies were open and how to serve the county at

large. The answers exist in the community, they just need to be put together in a way people can access them. In his TED Talk, Sinek states, “Inspired leaders and organizations regardless of their size, regardless of their industry -- all think, act and communicate from the inside out” (03:11). My proposed project seeks the same thing, to communicate the community's needs, resources, and strengths from the inside out and foster inclusivity that includes voices and opinions that may have been overlooked otherwise. Just because a community is different, or disadvantaged does not mean it does not have value, resources, or assets. Through working together and creating networks, the community will only become stronger.

### **Action Research**

Action research seeks to engage the community as active stakeholders who take on proactive roles in development. When many people think of West Virginia counties they also think of poverty. In the book, *When Helping Hurts*, Corbett and Fikkert establish three categories for alleviating poverty which are relief, rehabilitation, and development. Although all stages are important, Corbett and Fikkert explain that “the rehabilitation stage seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions. The key feature of rehabilitation is a dynamic of working with the...victims as they participate in their own recovery” (104). I have observed multiple areas that have experienced cycles of generational poverty, and the rehabilitation stage and process require a call to action for the community and provide a way to actively engage in action research.

In the book, *Walking with the Poor*, Bryant Myers addresses shifting from needs analysis to social analysis through the use of participatory research method such as the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) in order for the “research, analysis, and planning methods to become potentially transformational” (19). Corbett and Fikkert reinforce the same point by stressing,

“focusing on the assets of the community as opposed to the needs” (126). This method would start in the rehabilitation stage and the results would be applied in the development stage to help create sustainable change through action research. In Mason County and throughout West Virginia, people seem to focus on what the area needs to work on rather than the assets of the community. Through action research and focusing on assets the community will be able to identify what they have to offer and what capital exists.

In his book, *Action Research*, author Ernest Stringer shares that “action research is not a panacea for all ills and does not resolve all problems but provides a means for people to more clearly understand their situations and to formulate effective solutions to problems they face.” (8). Stringer also provides a basic approach called “look, think, act”, which is a straightforward approach that is incorporated into my plan of action and my resource guide for Mason County (9). The director of the Mason County Family Resource Network explained that this is mindset and mission statement of this organization, by explaining “The family resource network defines ‘family’ as people who work together and take the responsibility for and care for one another by protecting, nurturing, supporting, and educating” (Fowler 2020). I would describe community and the purpose of action research in this project the same way.

The guide achieves this by linking community organizations together. From building relationships with workers in adult education, job services, social services, and other community service providers and placing them in close proximity to one another, we are able to work together to help and direct others to resources as a unit rather than expecting individuals to locate all the resources separately. Although this does not guarantee that people will want to learn about the resources that are available to them, it is the start of introducing and highlighting programs and capacities throughout in the county.



## Program Evaluation

The qualitative methods and approaches reflected in my project are all aimed toward creating a collaborative community guide that helps increase access and equity. However, to produce equitable outcomes and determine the project effectiveness requires program evaluation. Since so much of my project is shaped by assets and community engagement, an assets-based approach for development felt like the natural choice for evaluation. According to author Sheena Cameron's report "Global Thematic Review of Training in Community-Based Research: Asset-based Research" in:

"asset-based development" there is an integration of process identifying, appreciating, and mobilizing assets and encouraging a shift in focus from needs/deficits to assets and opportunities with specific objectives to build assets locally and, in so doing, build agency or capacity to act among those people experiencing exclusion" (1).

In other words, we must be able to work together with our community to emphasize the strengths of a community through social capital. Qualitative program evaluation and asset-based approaches investigate the level in which communities are engaged and journey together. In his book, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, John Lederach explains, "We must conceptualize multiple change processes that address solutions for intermediate problems and at the same time processes that create a platform for longer-term change of relational and structural patterns" (38). As researchers we must do the same thing with qualitative and quantitative data. Community developers can incorporate qualitative and quantitative research to measure the long-term the effectiveness of a project. Community developers can look at the percentage of the community that is engaged and impacted through creating the guide and evaluate the effect it has on community access and well-being. This process is co-collaborative and benefits all parties

involved. Program evaluation is action-oriented and requires community developers to use copowerment and participatory action to work toward social change.

### **Conclusion**

Qualitative Research and the ICD program values inclusivity and looks at what community have to offer, rather than what they lack. Qualitative research allows community developers to discover hidden truths and understand the bigger picture of what is happening in a community. Due to the hidden depths and immersive experiences that qualitative approaches offer, participatory action and community engagement are possible. Qualitative data allows for relationships and trust to form, and through those relationships, transformation and change are possible. As development workers and agent of changes, there is an obligation to work out of compassion and that work should be carried out by instilling kindness. I can say with confidence that instilling kindness into present and future generations will benefit all parties involved. Additionally, if compassion is taught to future generations while stressing the importance of being kind, more people will naturally want to help one another and the planet. Cultivating quality qualitative research helps establish the meaning behind development work. Through understanding the meaning and mission behind community development, practitioners can strive to work in unison with those around them to create lasting solutions.

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### **ESSAY 3: ICD VALUES**

The principles and concepts taught in the International Community Development (ICD) program has helped expand my worldview and community relationships in a different light. Although I have always wanted to make a difference in the world and speak up for those without a voice, this program has shown me how to seek dignity for others in development and incorporate social justice practices into my daily routine. It has also helped me cultivate the desire to help in development and create sustainable change in communities and the world. Through this program, I have reexamined how I look at theology, philosophy, and social issues and developed the ability to step back and examine situations from different lenses and perspectives. I have tried to embody and embrace different perspectives in my project proposal and listen to the voice of the community as a whole. ICD values have helped shape the way I serve others and have encouraged collaboration in my work. Community development is built upon relationships and trust. Through building relationships with my cohort and becoming a student in the ICD program, I feel I have been enriched in my personal transformation, views of social justice, knowledge of copowerment, and helped me create my philosophy of service.

#### **Personal Transformation**

Since I was in high school in rural Appalachia, I have been involved in community improvement. I was appointed to local school improvement councils, active in student government, worked at the state level to improve business education and vocational training, and engaged in advocacy, politics, and helping my church. I have always had a passion and drive to make positive improvements in my local community and the world.

In January 2012, my life was forever changed when I suddenly fell ill and became disabled during my junior year of college. Although this sudden health change was traumatic, it

opened my eyes and gave me a different perspective on a community I had not been a part of or had much engagement with before. Although I was sick, I found opportunities to travel to India and Zambia and do more extensive short-term mission work with traditionally overlooked and ostracized communities. While working and doing mission work, I realized that people who were different or disabled were not only degraded in public, but many children were abandoned and left to die in their villages because they believed they could never function in society and must be cursed. This concept is something that I could not comprehend, and I desperately wanted to give these people justice and a voice.

Since I had become disabled and looked at as different in my community, I empathized and identified with the children and patients I worked with through facing my own discrimination. However, it paled in comparison to the extreme treatment that those I worked with were facing. Although I was still struggling with my health, I wanted to connect with my community and make a difference, and I applied to the ICD program. When I began the ICD program, my husband and I had recently moved back to West Virginia and lived with my parents. Two days before I left for Oxford, I found out I would need minor surgery, and I was still waiting for a ruling on a major procedure. As my husband questioned what to do vocationally and had accepted a long-term teaching job, I questioned what to do in general. For the ICD program, I knew I wanted to do something that helped people with disabilities, but I wasn't sure how to do this, where to do this, or with whom I should be working. Now, reading the lines from Palmer's poem, "Harrowing," the words have a different meaning.

"Whatever's been uprooted, let it be,

Seedbed for the growing that's to come,

I plowed the earth for last year's reasons,

The farmer's plows to plant a greening season" (72)

Even though we are still working through a difficult season, Palmer's poem reminds me that both the dark and the light seasons in our lives are meaningful, and that all seasons of life involving planting and sowing seeds that could impact our future. Although I was not facing depression, as Palmer was, I think it's safe to say that I was going through a stormy season, and I needed to "reengage with my community, so I could lead in areas that I cared about" (73). While I am still questioning my vocational calling, I am happy that I have the opportunity to work with people in my hometown who are trying to overcome barriers and that a job exists in my town.

Jobs are difficult to find where I live, and it's hard to find resources or who is hiring unless you are engaged in the community. This statement is valid throughout Appalachia and has been echoed through multiple voices in the community. Palmer discusses "that our inner work, though a deeply personal matter, it is not necessary a private matter; doing inner work together is a vital counterpoint to doing to it alone" (92). Struggling to find jobs and resources was not just an inner challenge for my husband and me, but also my community and region. With my thesis project proposal, I am building off these voices and the need for capacity building and resources within my community. Similar to how Palmer is speaking about letting our lives speak, our work should represent how our community is speaking, and our response is a result of how we are listening. One of our first lessons I learned in the ICD program was the values of the program, some being "the needs of people must take precedence over provincial, territorial, and vested interests of organizations and that working together can be difficult, yet efforts for social change are potentially magnified through the sharing of resources, expertise, and power" (Inslee). Through the ICD program, I have learned that my personal transformation is still evolving, and

that growth is part of my process. By learning and applying ICD principles and values, I can grow as a practitioner and now understand that sustainable change comes from working inside the community.

### **Social Justice**

My aspiration to make sustainable change and stand up against injustice is one of the reasons I was attracted to the ICD program. To me, social justice means equitable solutions for all people in multiple areas, such as well-being, economics, security, environmental solutions, and access to basic essentials. Throughout this program, we have learned about vulnerable populations and how the poor are more likely to experience injustice, and how to be an advocate for sustainable change and development. In the book, *Disaster and Development*, author Andrew Collins explains “that sustainable development is multifaceted and includes environmental, social, and economic factors” (16). Thus, to understand and provide sustainable support for impoverished communities and foster social justice practices, community development practitioners must listen to the community’s current strategies for survival and work together to understand the vulnerabilities and capabilities already built into the community.

Social justice involves trying to make the world a more equitable and better place for all communities. According to a study by Taylor and Taylor-Ide, “to achieve a more just and lasting future, we continually update our definition of development and advance more confidently and effectively into that unknown territory by drawing lessons from past successes and from past failures by tailoring solutions for each community to its specific hopes, capabilities, and resources” (200). Similarly, our vision of social justice must be refined to meet the needs and hopes of the community. The ICD program has encouraged us to listen to voices that are not our own and be in tune with outside voices or “the others”. In her book, *Resisting Structural Evil:*



*Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, Dr. Moe-Lobeda describes “othering, as the process by which people exclude others and render them less than us. The others may be less important, less worthy, less real, or weaker” (96). The ICD program encourages advocating for ourselves and others, which includes diminishing the process of othering through affirming people by showing them that they have potential and worth.

Social justice issues can extend to individuals and communities and often center around wealth and power. Moe- Lobeda defines “economic democracy, as the term most suitable to the theological norm of shared power in the economic realm” (228). Through helping communities and individuals build more economic capital, we are engaging in social justice and economic democracy by giving people access to economic opportunities. According to Moe-Lobeda, “neighbor-love makes demands on economic life because economic practices and policies profoundly impact the well-being of neighbors around the globe and where that impact is damaging, especially on a large scale, we are called to change it” (231). Whether it is fighting wealth disparities or other injustices, community developers should try to make communities more equal for their neighbors. According to a study by Matthew Richards, “the fight for social justice is fought on multiple fronts. It is a fight to be recognized, valued, and treated equitably, which unites diverse populations and takes on endless unique forms and variants. It isn’t just a fight out there; the stratification of populations seeps into the way we communicate and in turn conceptualize our place in the world” (248). To seek social justice is to seek unity and equity throughout the world.

Although the world is very diverse, all individuals and communities deserve protection and equality. Social justice is more than fighting injustices inflicted upon people; it is also about protecting the environment and changing individual practices to help the earth. In the Social and

Environmental Justice and Disaster Relief and Development classes, we learned that protecting the earth was not just a social justice issue but an issue of human dignity. In the article, “Dignity Rights and the Environment: Affirming Human Dignity through Environmental Justice,” authors Donald and Linehan address “the reality that the increasing destruction of our environment affects us all and risks preventing all of us from living our lives with dignity in the present and in the future” (176). This is relevant both in how we behave as consumers with our individual choices and the policies we support that affect the environment.

In order to engage in social justice practices, we must be good stewards of the environment and the community. Advocating and protecting individuals and the environment is essential to social justice and community development by being mindful of our decisions, practices, and encouraging others to come alongside us to build sustainable communities with a social consciousness that reject injustice.

### **Copowerment**

The term copowerment is defined as a dynamic of mutual exchange through which each side of a social equation is made stronger and more effective by the other (Inslee). Copowerment is meant to be mutually beneficial for both parties, and they are looked at as equal partners. Additionally, this practice encourages collaborating and sustainably. Although copowerment does not require each party to offer the same assets, it does require a relationship where both groups are viewed as offering an essential resource and bringing value to the partnership.

All relationships require trust and respect. In the book, *The Art of Leading Collectively: Co-Creating a Sustainable, Socially Just Future*, author Kuenkel, explains “trust-based co-creation strategy is humanity, mindfulness of difference and dynamics, a balance between task

and human encounter, empathy for the story that exists behind each person” (166). Copowerment can result in similar results because it requires trust, humility, and support.

One practitioner who embodied the traits of copowerment is Dwight Conquergood, an ethnographer who led by listening. When the International Rescue Committee assigned him to Ban Vinai, he did not want to coerce or tell refugees what was best for them; he wanted to create a program that improved health conditions through culturally appropriate materials. To develop an effective program, Conquergood believed that it needed participation among the people and that the tools and materials needed to be rooted in cultural strengths (222). One of the ways he learned about the Hmong culture is insisting on living among the people in the camp and, like the people, sharing their chores and lifestyles. Conquergood considered it crucial to live in the camp with the Hmong in hoping “to break the pattern of importing knowledge of ‘experts’ and distributing it to the refugees. He wanted to show that dialog was possible among refugees and health practitioners” (223). Conquergood led by listening, participating, and learning about Hmong health practices before trying to create a health program.

In my future work I hope to incorporate similar techniques to Conquergood by being an active listener and valuing the feedback and voices of the community while creating genuine relationships and respectfully sharing the communities’ stories. Copowerment shows that both cultures or groups have things to learn and gain from one another and that collaboration is essential to create positive change. As a future practitioner, I want to learn to be a better listener and think before acting. Hopefully, I will create passionate, collaborative work that enriches both cultures and replenishes each other. By incorporating copowerment into our work, the community and community developer have a collaborative and equal role in developing sustainable solutions that reflect the community’s values and needs.

## Philosophy of Service

My philosophy of service has been shaped by prayer, my commitment to Christ, and fostering an environment of mutual respect. As a Christ-follower, I am called to love the Lord, my neighbor and help the poor. In the book of Matthew in the Bible, chapter 25:40 states, “truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Holy Bible: New International Version). In this chapter, it is illustrating the Christian belief of the Second Coming of Christ and highlights what it will be like when the Lord comes back to earth. The verse is clarifying the Christian belief that how believers treat the needy and poor directly correlates to how Christ would be treated. Similarly, Bryan Stevenson explains in his book, *Just Mercy*, that:

Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson:

Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I’ve come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned ... We all need mercy, we all need justice, and—perhaps—we all need some measure of unmerited grace. (18)

I am inspired by Bryan Stevenson’s work and his perspective on service and justice. Through the act of prayer, embracing my own beliefs and accepting others beliefs while seeking justice, an environment of mutual respect can be cultivated in my relationships and my work. If my philosophy of service is rooted in my Christian belief, ICD practices, and seeking justice for the

underprivileged, then I will grow as a practitioner and serve out of a place of humility and mercy.

### **Conclusion**

Through participating in the ICD program, I have expanded my worldview and knowledge, while learning that sustainable change comes from listening to all the voices of the community. As I reflect on my classes and experiences in the ICD program, I am better prepared to work in my community and around the world. By building relationships centered around copowerment, ICD values, and embracing multiple perspectives of social justice I am more equipped to develop sustainable change in communities.

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## APPENDIX

### **Project Proposal Introduction**

Throughout history, the Appalachian region and West Virginia have been connected to generational poverty and coal mining. Although the coal industry dominated the economy of the region for over a century, mining and other coal jobs are currently disappearing. Since coal has been the dominant industry in many rural communities, the lack of employment and the closing of mines have further crippled impoverished communities. West Virginians who live in these communities have additional hardships and barriers and are especially vulnerable because they do not have resources or support. Although multiple organizations serve rural communities in counties throughout West Virginia, they are not connected. Since every county has vastly different needs and resources, it is essential to provide specific information to local communities. Many organizations do not have information about what they are doing online, so finding out where they serve and what they do is challenging. Through developing a county-specific resource guide that links important information and organizations together, people will have access to critical data and gain equity. By creating a free and accessible county resource guide, this project proposal can facilitate capacity building by helping the community understand what resources and capital already exist and how to access them. This county guide seeks to develop stronger capacity building by showing what resources, capital, and opportunities already exist in Mason County, West Virginia, and compiling that information into an easy-to-use directory, either online or in physical form.

### **Research Guide Project Background**

When I began exploring the subjects of social capital and capacity building, I wanted to develop a project that helped community members realize the value and resources that they had

available to them in their communities. Through developing a county resource guide that links important information and organizations together, I believe that many people will have access to important information and gain equity.

Additionally, because of the lack of internet access throughout the county, the resource guide would need to be made available online and at the resource buildings themselves to be effective. Since I set out to study social capital within Appalachia and how resource networks can be established for disadvantaged communities, this resource guide seems like a prime opportunity to do both. Although my research would be specific to my county in West Virginia, it could serve all members of the community and create growth for me as a researcher and my communities' access to existing resources.

Throughout the ICD program, my goal has been to make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged communities and engage in capacity building in Appalachia. In his article, "Making dollars by making sense: Linking rural education and development in Appalachia," Sher asks the reader: "What will you do to foster educational excellence and an economic renaissance across Appalachia? What will you do to create the vision, the voice, and the victories needed to give substance to the dreams of a better Appalachia? What will you do?" (10). My answer to these questions is developing a free county-specific resource guide. Through creating a free resource guide that is accessible throughout the county, this project has the potential to help the community understand what equity and capital already exist and develop a deeper community bond.

### **Fieldwork Context**

Through completing my fieldwork with the Career Connections program through Workforce West Virginia, while simultaneously training to become a Youth Career Specialist



with the organization, I was given the opportunity to observe in five of the nine counties that the program serves and learn more about how those communities operate. The Mid-Ohio Valley Workforce Development Board website explains that “Career Connections is an employment and training program that focuses on developing academic, occupational, and social skills for persons 16- 24 years of age. They believe in creating and exposing young people to opportunities that not only enrich the lives of the participants but also of those around them” (“Workforce Development Board”). Although the purpose of the program is to help assist youth with educational or economic opportunities, it serves multiple purposes and acts as a resource and connection point for many of the youth that it serves.

During the beginning of my training, the Vogl text, *The Art of Community: Seven Principles of Belonging*, kept coming to mind. Although I was being trained for a specific job, I was observing it in the context of three communities, the community of my other Career Connections co-workers, the communities and participants in the other eight counties, and then my county office and participants, which shares an office space with three other community organizations and resources. All of these communities were linked and served “as a group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another’s welfare,” but the bonds of these communities were all extremely different (Vogl 19). When I started training, it became apparent quickly that each office had its own community and personality and that I would have different levels and roles to play in these communities.

I started with observation and listening to the surroundings of the other offices, and I used my co-worker as a cultural broker into communities where he had offices and was already an active member of the community. Culture brokers are an essential part of the framework for

understanding and effectively listening to a community. Here is an excerpt from my fieldwork journal from a disciplinary meeting in a surrounding county:

*Nestled between the mountain, a mere two hours away, is a county untouched by time. By looking and driving through the winding roads, you feel like you are traveling back 20 to 30 years in time because despite surviving natural disasters, modern technology, and slightly newer infrastructure, the only indication that time has passed are the occasional brightly colored business signs. I try to take in the scenery while I attempt to follow my co-worker through the twisting backroads with no end in sight. When we arrive at our first location, it is the county high school, which has under 200 students, no central air, and has barely been touched since 1971 when it was built. My co-worker and I walk into the school and are greeted warmly by students and staff as we wait to interview the youth. My co-worker is prepping for difficult conversations and has warned me to prepare to do the same. As the youth assemble in the hall, they are dirty from hard work. When the first boy comes in, he greets us both and lowers his gaze; he is hesitant to make eye contact with my co-worker. He is nervous and fidgeting in his seat with a stoic expression but soft fearful eyes. When my co-worker asks him to tell him what happened two nights ago, the boy looks as he may cry, gulps, and composes himself as he tells us that his parents have kicked him out and stolen all the money from his bank account. He describes packing his things on a four-wheeler and driving to a relative's house in the middle of the night. Although his eyes water at the brim, his face shows no other expression. When asked what we could do to help him or if he needed anything, the boy responded, "please give me more hours to work. I have what I need; I just want to work."*

*Despite his strong resilience, in this situation, when asked what he was afraid of, the boy responds, "online school and using a computer."*

The participant in the meeting accepted me and shared his story because of the relationship that had been established by my co-worker. Although it started off as a disciplinary meeting, it unearthed layers of what was really going on in the boy's life and why he had broken the rules and came to work. He needed the money and was not sure he would have a place to go, and work was somewhere he felt safe. While there are rules that have to be followed within the Career Connections program, my goal was to try to be similar to the example set by Francesca Farr, who as a social worker, worked within the belief system of her clients and did not push her own beliefs on them, which in turn led to her establishing better services and experiences for her clients because she took the time to get to them in their culture (Fadiman 265). Investing time, cultural sensitivity, and building trust are essential to creating relationships with people and understanding their stories.

When I began working in Mason County, I kept these lessons in mind and went in with the mindset of listening first before developing an opinion. My goal was to hear the voice of the community and to listen and record the stories the community members were trying to tell, rather than telling my version of community members stories. Every community must have some transcendent narrative that gives meaning and provides moral direction and social purpose (Myers 55). For too long, the primary narrative and purpose of West Virginia communities have been communicated through the lens of industries rather than individuals.

### **Research Methods-Qualitative**

Throughout my fieldwork, I conducted qualitative research with an ethnographic study featuring narrative interviews and observations, surveys, first-hand experiences, and personal

reflections. Before interviewing or observing participants or Workforce offices, I conducted a county internet access/Wi-Fi survey where I drove throughout my county to see where I had internet and service and searched for areas of the county where internet access was an option. Additionally, before officially starting with my fieldwork placement, I filled out applications for local assistance services in the county for Unemployment, Medicaid, and Food Stamps to get a sense of how difficult these processes were and to get to know the community agencies as an individual before stepping into a partner role.

The interviews were conducted with a list of preassembled lists of questions. The questions were designed to be open-ended and were adjusted to each participant based upon individual needs or variables. The questions listed in the following section were inspired by aspects of participatory asset-mapping and formulated to gather answers to help me better understand what areas the community needed to improve on and what assets already existed in the community. This was a unique opportunity for me as an insider in the community to talk to different organizations and youth in the community to see what they considered resources and what weakness they identified within the county.

During my interviews with my program participants and community members, I was intentional about making them feel comfortable and establishing relationships with them. Initially, I was worried that the program participants would feel like they had to participate because of my job positions, so I was intentional in explaining that the interviews were voluntary and that they did not have to participate if they were not interested. As an extra component of protecting the participants, I used pseudo-names and initials for documenting their interviews so the program participants would not feel like they were being misled for their answers and stories. When I read *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*, I

realized I conducted my interviews in a similar way that some of the researchers did in their study, by asking “participants about a range of subjects, including local services, infrastructure, youth retention, social capital, and also featured a number of open-ended questions designed to ascertain local perceptions, assets, and barriers” (Schumann and Fletcher 218).

Since my early observations and community drives also indicated that accessibility was an issue, I was drawn to Participatory Assets Mapping processes when I was writing my interview questions. Janice Burns writes that “Participatory Asset Mapping can support strategic planning efforts by building on existing community strengths and it recognizes human capital and the capacity of individuals to use their own hearts, heads, and hands to build and create positive structures in their communities” (7). The goals of Participatory Assets Mapping are the same goals I wanted to bring to my project proposal.

### **Connection between Fieldwork and Project Proposal**

Throughout my fieldwork observations and interviews, the community expressed the need for resource networks and communicated that they did not know what resources were available to them or how to access them. Lynch and Walls write in their book, *Mission Inc.*, “The greatest of ideas with the most abundant of resources will fail if the culture is not conducive to success. You will want to be proactive in establishing your culture such that it is aligned with your mission, objectives, and the message you want to deliver through your marketing” (153). My goal was to create project proposal that would help highlight the existing resources in the community that could be accessed in multiple ways. Through developing a county resource guide that links important information and organizations together, I believe that many people will have access to important information and gain equity.

## Personal Connection

When most people think of West Virginia, they associate hillbillies and poverty along with the state. Low-income families have historically been prevalent in the Appalachian region and West Virginia for over a century. Although career training programs exist throughout the state of West Virginia, sometimes finding these resources can be challenging. I have to admit that I am biased when it comes to the importance of these programs, mainly because I would not exist today without them.

In the 1940s, organizations across the United States started recruiting women to go to work in jobs that traditionally had been held by men. My grandma explained she didn't remember exactly what the poster said. Still, she remembered seeing a poster in her hometown of Clifton, West Virginia, recruiting women to go to work at the shipbuilding company, Marietta Manufacturing, in Point Pleasant, WV. Her two motivations for signing up to work were to help aid in the war effort, where her brother was serving, and simply to make more money. Due to finances and already coming from a lower-income family, my grandma was only able to obtain an eighth-grade education. Her family needed her to go to work to make extra money, so when she came upon this poster, she wanted the opportunity to learn a new skill and try a new job.

After signing up, my grandma became one of twelve women to become welders and riveters for the shipbuilding company. She enjoyed working at the company and expected to learn a new skillset. She never expected to find love. After joining the Marietta Manufacturing company, she met my grandfather, who was also working as a welder at the time. The company even ran an article in the paper called "Welders Weld Their Hearts Together" when they married. This is one of the many blessings of the program and something my grandma deemed as a part of God's plan because she said the last thing she was looking for was a husband when she started

working. While my grandma did not stay a welder, she did continue to work in the river business. She worked as a cook for the river division of AEP until retiring. My grandpa was a carpenter and a welder, but after he was injured, my grandma became the primary breadwinner for the household. She sometime worked two or three jobs before being hired at AEP to keep food on the table for my mother and uncle, which was untraditional at the time. Even after my grandpa passed away, my grandma continued working hard and instilled this value in her children.

My parents came from low-income families and worked through high school and college to become the first members of their families to graduate from college. My mother became a Business Education teacher, who would end up working at a vocational school and teaching students job readiness and helping them find career paths through training programs, her school, or in the community. Although my dad has held multiple jobs working with low-income populations and in businesses in West Virginia, one of the positions he held was in a career training program targeted at young adults in Mason County through a program facilitated through the state called Workforce West Virginia. Over a decade later, I now hold that same position and serve in Mason County with Career Connections, a career training program for low-income young adults facing barriers. While the office is only a few miles from the former Marietta Manufacturing Plant where my grandparents met, it is interesting for me to think about how God was a part of my family's plan and the impact that community resources and career training programs have had on my family's lives. I might not be here today if my grandmother had not seen the career training poster and gone to work.

While many of the participants I work with share similar hardships that my grandma endured, I remind myself and my participants that their circumstances do not define them and

that the choices they make today are what affect their future. Additionally, the need for career training programs and resource networks among West Virginians are crucial, and I'm living proof that they can change the course of a family's life. While I only represent one program in West Virginia, the need for resource networks is essential, and my connection and dedication to strengthening them is strong.

### **The Project**

After interviewing and observing multiple stakeholders in the community such as program participants, county government officials, community organization leaders, and the general public a common theme of confusion emerged over what resources are available, where they are located, and who is providing them. My project aims to address this confusion by using capacity building to show what resources, capital, and opportunities already exist in Mason County, West Virginia through compiling that information into an easy-to-use resource directory. This project involves working and connecting numerous organizations within my county to learn what services exist, where they are located, and in what areas of the county they serve. This resource guide will be available online and in hard copy at the resource buildings themselves to effectively serve multiple areas of the county and people with and without internet access. This guide will be mutually beneficial to the providers and the community and aims to create a free and equitable solution that connections all county resources into a single guide. The specifics of the proposed Mason County resource guide such as need, how county resources will be organization and categorized, and the accessibility of this project are included in the following sections.



## The Need

Throughout my fieldwork experience, the phrase "you are not your circumstances" has stuck with people, regardless of who I was meeting within the community. Throughout my conversations and observations with stakeholders, they have shared this sentiment and expressed the desire to do more and build more partnerships and resources within the county while also sharing some of the struggles they are facing. Among program participants they have emphasized their desire to rebuild their lives and not be judged for their past mistakes. Both groups are facing hardships and looking for opportunities. In one of my first interviews with a program participant, "James," one of the first phrases out of his mouth was "I'm a felon," as he told me about himself. Although he has so many positive attributes and has overcome multiple hardships, he is still very concerned with his past limiting his future. "James" is someone who has so much potential but needs more encouragement and opportunities. When a job placement opened up on a Friday evening, "James" was my first call. "James" was in my office as early as I could open the door on Monday morning, so I could review a quick training with him and prepare him for his interview on Tuesday. "James" and the local communities in the county are similar. Both are facing hardships, but they need opportunities and resources. When the town found out about the paid work experience program, they called me and had a similar reaction to "James" and tried to move up the guys' interviews because they were so eager to have them. Both communities and people facing hardships have value and should be defined by their future, not the struggles of their past.

West Virginia communities often feel that they are defined by their circumstances rather than what they have to offer. After observing and listening to many stakeholders in the community, it became clear that something was needed to unify the community and that they

were unaware of what resources were available to them. Although there was a desire for connection and existing resources, there was not currently a place where the community could learn about what resources were available to them. The purpose of the resource guide is to help the community understand what resources exist and how to access them. Ideally, the guide will serve as a practical community development tool that serves as a centralized method of viewing resources throughout the county. According to an article by authors Christopher Holtkam and Russell Weaver, “connections between social capital and real-world social and economic conditions add value to active, on-the-ground efforts in Appalachia and lean toward locally driven strategies that build community capacity” (60). The resource guide I am proposing follows the same line of thinking because it will be driven by community participation fostering social capital and county capacity building.

### **County Categorization of Organizational Resources**

In their book, *Social Entrepreneurship*, the authors use a bonsai tree to signify the growth and potential of others: “A person deprived of education or opportunity is like a bonsai. The constraint isn’t the seed, it’s the pot” (Bornstein 112). When I reflected on my area, I realized that I need to help my community create a garden of resources rather than putting them all in separate individual pots. In my proposed project, the resources will be divided into categories of services. My proposed project will divide the resources into seventeen sections, including Housing, Hospitals and Healthcare Services, Emergency and Crisis Services, Early Education, Employment/Training Education, Disability Services, Counselling and Behavior Health, Community Service Organizations, Nutrition, Recreation, Social Services and Assistance, Legal Assistance, County and State Offices and Services, Substance Abuse- Prevention & Treatment,

Transportation, Religious Organization, and Senior Services. The sections will provide the name and locations of these resources in the county.

### **Accessibility**

The resource guide will be available online and in-person at resources throughout the county. The resource guide will include a map of the county with the services and organizations, so residents will know where these resources are located and when their operation hours. By making the resource guide available throughout the county, it can help account for the lack of internet access that is prevalent throughout the county.

### **Conclusion**

Since developing the idea and completing fieldwork, the need for a strong connection in the community has been apparent. This county-specific resource guide seeks to help make that connection possible. Although the goal of this project proposal is to construct a county-specific resource guide to showcase what resources, capital, and opportunities exist within the county and giving residents access to them, its potential stretches past the residents of Mason County. Through creating a free resource guide for Mason County, the community will gain a useful tool in developing equitable solutions that could serve as an example for the state. By linking together community partners and organizations that serve Mason County and other counties, this resource guide has the potential to facilitate knowledge and community bonds for Mason County residents, while simultaneously producing a county-specific guide as a model that could be replicated to meet the needs of other counties searching for equity and access to resources within West Virginia.

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