

## Abstract

University-led service-learning projects are commonly perceived as being mutually beneficial for students, faculty, and communities. Most studies primarily focus on benefits to students. Our study explores the value of a university-led service-learning engagement project from a community's perspective. To assess perceptions of a student planning and design project, pre- and post-questionnaires were completed by community members and city staff. Findings show the community had an immediate positive response during the project. However, we question the long-term effects of service-learning for communities if tangible outcomes from engagement projects are not realized. Implications are intended to be useful for university teaching faculty considering service-learning, university administrators evaluating such efforts, and for community members, civic leaders, and city staff considering partnering with universities for education outreach and engagement projects.

## Understanding Community Perceptions of Service-Learning

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As a land-grant institution, our university has a mission and tradition of working with communities across the state in various capacities. For assistance on specific projects, communities will often contact university extension agents or teaching faculty to initiate service-learning collaborations. Such projects, when integrated into a course and aligned with student learning objectives, are thought to benefit students, faculty and the community (Bushouse, 2005).

In our work, we use the term service-learning to mean “methodologies and pedagogical approaches that lead from the classroom to effective community-identified outcomes,” which for us includes a community-engagement component, where students from the class interact with members of the community to achieve stated outcomes (Yarborough, 2012, p. 4). And since the types of service-learning projects can vary greatly, we want to clarify that—as professors and scholars in community development, urban planning, and landscape architecture—our students typically engage with community members, private stakeholders, civic leaders, and city staff in a simulated professional capacity, to address issues related to the built environment. Each service-learning project is carefully planned and organized, with clear expectations about the process and products so that the experience meets learning objectives and community needs. Outcomes typically include assessment reports, user surveys, visionary plans, site designs and visualizations. These specific products are important to note, because they provide communities with information that can be used to improve physical spaces and services, thereby creating a sense of

promise to those looking for change. However, the lasting impacts and overall perceived value of these types of service-learning projects for communities is less understood. Therefore, to better understand a community's perceived value of a service-learning planning and design project, our study examines a recent course project in Emporia, Kansas.

## Literature Review

Service-learning is commonly perceived as a “win-win-win,” for students, faculty, and communities (Bushouse, 2005). As scholars and professors of disciplines that focus on the study of place, space, and communities, it is difficult to imagine an academe without community engagement. In preparing tomorrow's professionals, we provide a holistic educational experience that, through service-learning projects, exposes students to real-world settings and situations. The communities where students work, are hypothesized to benefit from this exposure too, because they receive services and products that may otherwise be unattainable. The success of a service-learning effort is often judged by student learning outcomes and the production of engage scholarship, but whether the community actually benefited from a project is less considered.

The benefits of service-learning for students during their undergraduate and graduate studies is well documented and primarily includes exposure to real-world practical experience and the development of civic responsibility (Alexander, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Breese & Richmong, 2002; Dinour, Szaro, Blumberg, & Mousumi, 2018; Fisher, Sharp, & Bradley, 2017; Fritz, 2002; McDonough, Marks, & Harris, 2017; Mobley, 2007; Mooney & Edwards, 2001; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Strage, 2004). For applied professional community-based disciplines these skills are essential for achieving student learning outcomes associated with class objectives (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hullender, Hinck, Wood-Nartker, Burton, & Bowlby, 2015). Although the nuances of student benefits may warrant further clarity, as not all students learn in the same ways (Harkins, Kozak, Ray, 2018), the literature overwhelming shows positive students benefits, and this paper operates with this general assumption.

For faculty, service-learning projects can energize the classroom and enrich the teaching experience (Brigle & Hatcher, 1996). Faculty benefits can also be derived from achieving set teaching objectives (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hullender, et al., 2015) and from the production of scholarship outcomes, which can aid in knowledge transfer from university professors to communities (Jones, Giles, & Carroll, 2019). For faculty in applied fields, we advocate activities associated with service-learning projects will support professional development. However, a potential downside of service-learning projects, based on our personal experience, can also be an overload, with extra time and resources required for project development and ongoing management.

In contrast to students, there is less scholarship regarding the benefits of service-learning projects for communities (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Stoecker & Tyron, 2009). Littlepage, Gazley, & Bennett (2012) show community non-profit and community-based organizations benefit from student volunteerism, as do Jones, Giles, & Carroll (2019) who discuss this benefit through volunteerism in a college town. It is also thought that communities benefit from “free labor,” or at least cheaper labor, as well from developing connections to potential future employees (Bushouse, 2005; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Jones, Giles, & Carroll, 2019; Stoecker & Tyron, 2009). Additional benefits may include

the introduction of new energy into a community, about a project, and/or enhancing town and gown relationships (Vanderbilt, 2019). Importantly though, Dorgan notes that even well-intentioned projects can have adverse effects for communities, if executed poorly or when there is the lack of follow-through (2008).

## Methods

### *Background*

In the spring of 2017, an interdisciplinary group of landscape architecture and planning students from Kansas State University collaboratively worked to develop a visioning document and master plan for Peter Pan Park, in Emporia, Kansas (population approximately 25,000). Peter Pan Park, established in the 1920's, is a storied amenity within the Emporia community. The 50-acre park is located south of downtown in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, and includes a champion disc-golf course, a small lake, and various recreation amenities. However, many of the site's features are heavily worn, outdated, and not well-suited to meet the needs of the city's growing and increasingly diverse community. Additionally, the park lacks adequate ADA accessibility, cohesive internal circulation, and connections to the surrounding neighborhood.

Though a new park master plan was needed, professional planning and design services were beyond the financial reach for the city, so they turned to the department of Landscape Architecture and Regional & Community Planning at Kansas State University for assistance. Emporia's city planner, an alum of our planning program, was familiar with the nature of our department's service-learning projects and recognized an opportunity for a mutually beneficial collaboration between the city and an interdisciplinary group of students. The city was made aware however, that as a student-centered project there would be no guarantees of product quality and that design outcomes would be conceptual in nature. Funding for the project was provided by the City of Emporia and covered basic travel and production-related expenses. As part of the service-learning agreement, the city was asked to provide public space and advertisement for community engagement meetings.

Twenty-eight students from two on-campus courses—Collective Decision-Making and Site Design—participated in the multi-week service-learning project as part of required coursework. The project began with students, from Collective Decision-Making, soliciting community input at an open public meeting at a local elementary school. Students employed various engagement activities designed to stimulate conversation and capture the community's desires and concerns for the park. Outcomes of the meeting were summarized into a visioning document and provided to students in Site Design. Students in Site Design then used the visioning document, along with historical and physical data from an existing condition analysis, to develop several master plan alternatives. In a follow-up open public meeting, held at the Emporia Public Library, the Site Design students presented their design proposals in the form of drawings. The work sparked additional dialogue and garnered important community input for city staff. At the conclusion of the semester, the city was given all student produced documents for use in their future planning, design, and fundraising efforts.

### *Analytic Strategy*

To assess how the Emporia community valued the service-learning engagement process, we administered a pre- and post-project questionnaire to all community members and city staff who attended the public meetings. Through Likert-scale and open-ended questions, the pre-questionnaire assessed their hopes and desires and any concerns regarding working with university students (not about the outcome for the park, but the actual engagement process). Following the final community presentation, and the unveiling of park design possibilities, city staff and community members in attendance were asked to complete a reflective post-project questionnaire to assess their opinions on the actual engagement process.

The first public meeting (visioning session) was held on a Tuesday evening, March 7, 2017, in the library of an elementary school adjacent to the park. This meeting was widely advertised before and during the event, directly to neighbors near the park, park goers, and the general public via local radio, bulletins, and social media. The first public meeting resulted in 24 survey respondents, which included three (3) city staff and 21 community members. Please see Figure 1. The second public meeting (presentation) was held on a Saturday afternoon, April 29, 2017, downtown at the city library. This meeting was also open, advertised directly to those from the first meeting and broadly via local radio, bulletins, social media, and on the day-of, to library patrons with onsite signage. The second public meeting garnered 17 survey respondents, which included the same three (3) city staff and 14 community members. Please see Figure 2. In both instances there were more attendees at the meetings than surveys completed as the survey was optional.

Figure 1. Regional & Community Planning student engaged with a community member during the first public meeting on March 7, 2017. Photo taken by Author.



Figure 2. Landscape Architecture students engaged with a community members during the second public meeting on April 29, 2017. Photo taken by Author.



### *Implications*

The findings from this study are intended to be useful for university teaching faculty considering the use of similar type projects, university administrators evaluating faculty practices, and community members, civic leaders, and local government staff considering partnering with universities for education outreach and engagement projects.

### Findings

#### *First Public Meeting (Visioning Session)*

All responses bulleted in this section are taken verbatim from what respondents wrote on the returned questionnaires at the end of each public meeting. The first public-engagement meeting was a visioning session, city staff (n=3) were asked about the hoped-for outcomes, potential benefits for the city, and concerns about the process. The responses were as follows:

#### City Staff Responses

Hoped-for outcomes from onset of the service-learning project:

- An opportunity to provide a quality learning experience for the students and a quality project for the city.
- Win-win for the city of Emporia and “real life experience” for the students.
- Good ideas for the best use of the park.
- Learning experience for both groups.

Potential benefits for the city from the service-learning project:

- Objective insight; fresh perspective.
- Different perspectives; outside feedback. New ideas.
- Opportunity to work with the public in a working setting.

Concerns about the engagement process:

- Biggest concern is that the public is engaged but not promised anything from the information gathered.
- People tend to dream big and get disappointed when they aren't fulfilled.
- Lack of funding to implement changes.
- Some students seem to have all the answers – I think being open-minded, and listening could be part of the benefit.

Members of the community (n=21) were asked up-front if they had previously worked with students, why they chose to attend the meeting, their hoped-for outcomes, and if they had any concerns about the process. Their responses included:

### Community Member Responses

From those who previously worked with students, regarding their past experiences:

- Project generated ideas and thinking always great to interact with faculty and students.
- They produced an excellent [product].
- Students are so sincere in their mission.

Reason for attending this visioning session:

- I love Peter Pan Park (x3).
- We live near the park and love to walk there. I have been going to the park since the late 1950s. Softball, baseball, touch football – lots of fun.
- Live in the neighborhood and lots of memories of the park.
- I live next to park.
- To be an active community member.
- Learn what is going on.
- Interested in ideas that would improve an important part of the city and possible ways to interface with projects in the future. North Central – Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging owns the Friendship Center on Logan Avenue.
- To share ideas in order to get youth, families, returning veterans and people with disabilities “Outside for a Better Inside!”
- Need to rebuild amphitheater – it could be used for so much.
- Concern about the amphitheater & wading pool.
- Important to me that the large open area to the south-east stay open. I would love to see the monkey island upgraded to a koi pond and a rose garden started in that “area.”
- Fishing at Peter Pan Park.
- My brother brought me.
- A friend told me about it.

- I came to interpret for Spanish-speaking community members but stayed because the park was a great place to spend family time in my younger years.

Hoped for outcomes from the visioning session:

- Improvements discussed to be implemented.
- Park improvement.
- Positive change/ improvements.
- That they can cooperate to come up with a variety of ideas from the community and maybe make some changes to make the park better.
- Determine some ideas.
- Hope they compile suggestions and come up with great ideas.
- To make the park the best it can be.
- A great plan and future projects.
- Develop a short term and long-term plan for the park that is accomplished and not “put on a shelf.”
- [Institution] involvement is always beneficial to any community.
- I hope we can somehow keep it a little cleaner. People discard too much trash.
- Acknowledgement of outdoors.
- Cooperation?
- Don't change too much.

Concerns about this visioning process:

- No (x7).
- Not at this time.
- No. Maybe find financing.
- Money.
- Funding and partners in the community that prevent change.
- I do still like how it is now.

Other comments:

- Delightful (process) and very good listeners.
- Everyone was very informative.
- Very excited that the park will be getting some improvements!
- Lots of creative ideas.
- The process is positive. All ideas can be molded into the park
- Brought back many memories of the park.

### *Second Public Meeting (Presentation)*

When we reconvened at the end of the semester to present the park designs, we conducted a second survey. The primary question asked of city staff was whether the process lived up to their hopes. Their (n=3) responses were as follows:

#### City Staff Responses

Did the overall process live up to hopes:

- Yes!

- Yes, the students and staff held professional meetings, listened to the public, and provided great ideas and documents.
- Yes, the students did a very good job.

City staff were also asked if they had any concerns about the process at this point. Their responses were as follows:

Concerns about the overall process:

- I'm very impressed with the students and their completed projects. Great ideas and their presentation was top notch!!
- I have been surprised by the public feedback, lots of positive comments.
- No.

### Community Member Responses

Community members were asked if they thought the process lived up to their hopes, if they had concerns about the process as well, if there were any surprises about the process, their reason for attending the meeting, and any hoped-for outcomes.

Did the overall process live up to their hopes:

- Yes, variety of ideas/ plans.
- Yes, very excited to see the plans worked out in the near future.
- Yes, excellent work.
- Good ideas.
- Yes.

Concerns about the overall process:

- No (x4).
- Yes, too much to consider – funds available?

Surprises about the process:

- No (x2).
- Such a creative variety!
- So professional.
- Didn't realize this many displays.

Reason for attending the presentation:

- Wanted to know what might happen to Peter Pan Park in the future.
- Heard about it on KVOE – Peter Pan most of all needs a water feature for kids – and a sidewalk to the play area.
- Interest and commitment to William Allen Whyte legacy.
- Curious to what the ideas are for the park and was very impressed.
- To make sure Emporia was moving in the right direction and not going to remove the history.
- Grew up a block or so north of the park, so we considered it “our” park. Wanted to see if favorite places were going to remain with some of the old but enhanced.
- As a follow-up and to talk about it on my radio show.



- Peter Pan Park is one of my favorite places. So I was interested to see the proposals for change.

Hoped-for outcomes from the presentation:

- We should use some of the better ideas from the presentations.
- That the students' plans will be implemented.
- Love the ideas & willingness to listen to our ideas.
- Just want to see what would be in our future hear in town.
- See what is being looked at.
- A fishing program in the park.
- I would like to see city incorporate some of these proposals while maintaining as much of the old as possible.
- I hope the project gets started soon!

Additional comments:

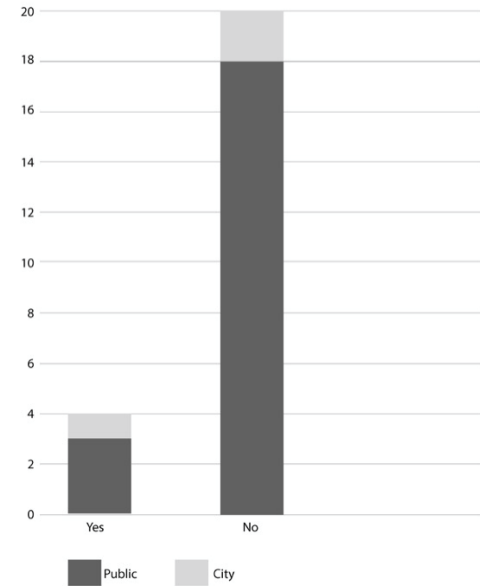
- All of the students were personable and knowledgeable. The displays were beautifully done! So glad I came and wish the project could start today. Thanks to all and A's all around.
- Very impressed how the plans continued to include the history of the park.
- These look like excellent possibilities that I hope (many of them) will be possible.
- Very impressed with the students work and their presentations for their projects. Many exciting ideas proposed.
- The students have done a great job. Beautiful landscaping plans.
- Looks like the students have done one outstanding job.
- I thought that all the students did an amazing job with their presentations.
- Pleased with the procedure and process.
- These are impressive results and hopefully will result in an even better park. (Peter Pan is a particularly beloved park to us).
- Have students understand the importance of park to our city and all of us!
- The Park is part of the City Beautiful Movement embraced by William Allen Whyte when he donated to land and hired Hare and Hare (student of Fredrick Law Olmsted) to design it. Sensitivity to the historic design should be taken into account.
- Please don't add stuff in the middle of the lake. It takes away photograph possibilities.
- Should have attended March 7 (visioning) meeting.
- There was also a contingent of pickleball advocates; eight (x8) surveys indicated a strong desire for pickleball courts.

Figure 3 displays the respondents previous experience with working with university students on outreach and engagement projects. Figure 4 demonstrates the public's perception of confidence in and assessment of the students' abilities to work with and understand their local community issues. Figure 5 shows pre- and post-perceptions in the abilities of the students to produce quality work.

**Figure 3. Number of individuals with previous experience working with university students on outreach and engagement projects.**

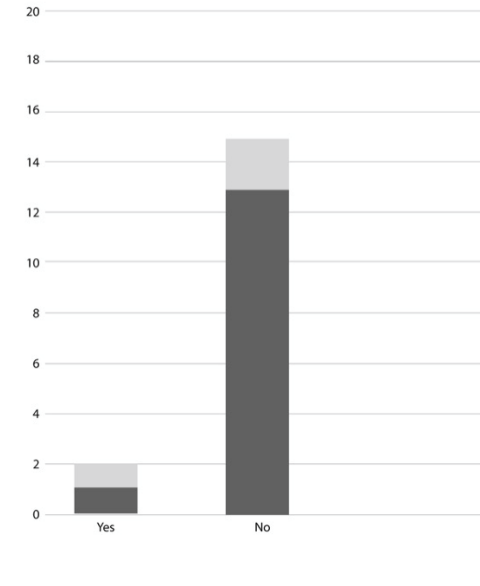
Public Meeting (March 7)

Have you ever worked with university students on a public project before? (n=24)



Public Presentation (April 29)

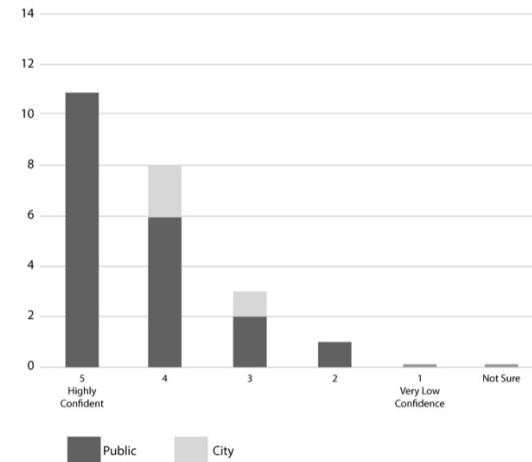
Have you ever worked with university students on a public project before? (n=17)



**Figure 4. Pre- and post-project assessment of public's confidence in students' abilities to work with and understand local community issues.**

Public Meeting (March 7)

How confident are you in the students' ability to understand the community's issues? (n=23)



Public Presentation (April 29)

After seeing the students' work, how would you rate their ability to understand the community's issues? (n=6)

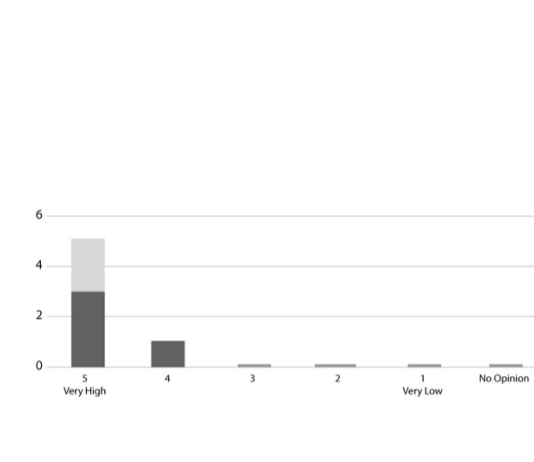
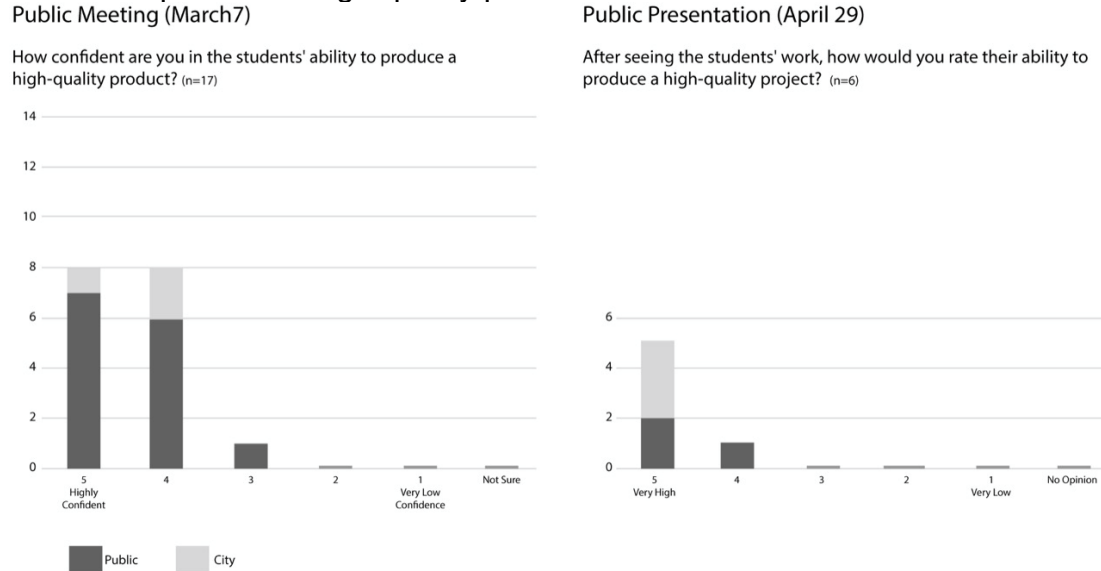


Figure 5. Pre- and post-project assessment of public's confidence in students' abilities to produce a high-quality product.



## Discussion

Overall, respondents were positive about the process of working with university students. Despite being generally pleased with the process and student products, the city staff and community members also both expressed concerns about the realization of tangible outcomes for the park; questioning if anything will come of the effort. It is noteworthy that many people who attended the public meetings had a specific agenda or concern. For example, fishing was suggested at Peter Pan Park by a gentleman who operates an outdoors education organization that teaches fishing. There were several examples of this; perhaps most significantly with the pickleball advocates who were not present at the visioning session but showed up at the presentation, in matching green pro-pickleball shirts, and “stuffed” the survey box with pro-pickleball comments.

The primary benefits of this service-learning project are clear: this was an inexpensive means to generate ideas for the community and provide a “real world” experience for students (future community professionals). These benefits correspond with the existing literature reviewed. As well, bringing a diverse array of community members together, who might not normally engage with one another, is thought positive for community development in terms of bonding and bridging social capital (Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer, 2016). Yet we still question the ramifications of getting a community excited about a process if there is no outcome. The ultimate realization of the project is beyond our control. When the semester is over, students graduate/move on to other classes, faculty refocus on other obligations, and project ownership is transferred from the class to the community. Fortunately for the Emporia community, the city was able to capitalize on the momentum from our service-learning project and in May 2019 a new splash pad, inspired by the students' projects, was unveiled.

Figure 6. Newly built park amenities derived from the class service-learning project. Photo taken by author.



### *Limitations and Future Research*

This study concludes by confirming a positive community perception of a service-learning project, but also questions the ramifications of getting a community excited about a project if there are no tangible outcomes. In this case, Peter Pan Park in Emporia, Kansas saw built improvements; but what happens when service-learning brings people together to discuss ideas, generating excitement about a potential change, but does not lead to realization or reward? It may lead to disappointment and a lack of participation in future community engagement efforts. This sentiment was expressed by both city staff and community members in the surveys.

This service-learning project was initiated because city staff wanted to potentially make improvements to the park, despite their concerns about being able to finance construction of proposed ideas. Essentially, the city knowingly took a risk by engaging the students and community in this project; concerned about getting community members excited without follow through. Two years lapsed between the student service-learning project and construction in the park, which is a relatively quick turnaround; however, in the eyes of a community member this period of time could feel long if they are not made aware of planning efforts in the interim.

Furthermore, though a new splash pad was added in Peter Pan Park, this single feature does not fulfill all community suggestions, and some may feel their voice went unheard. Sometimes suggestions will conflict with each other and/or are simply not feasible. This is inevitably the case with any visioning project and tradeoffs will be made. The city should be sensitive to the situation and address concerns accordingly.

This study does not follow-up or attempt to address this concern, as we focused on the more immediate community perception of university service-learning engagement projects, but we (the authors) advocate for future research that helps better understand long-term effects of service-learning projects and their un/realized outcomes.

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#### Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the students who participated from Kansas State University, the residents of the Emporia area who contributed with their engagement, and city staff for their accommodations, particularly staff planner and Regional and Community Planning program alum Joseph “Joe” Foster, who initiated this service-learning project.