

Digital Humanities Proposal
Poverty 102 (Winter 2014)
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Connecting the Dots: Mapping Low-Income Needs and Services in the Rockbridge Area

This multi-parted, semester-long project introduces students to: a) the specific challenges facing disadvantaged populations in the rural Rockbridge area; and b) the benefits of data visualization in addressing those challenges. As volunteers at local non-profits, 102 students are ideally suited to collaborate on the creation of a digital map illustrating our area's low-income services, unaddressed needs, and most promising future solutions.

I. During the first part of the course, students will introduce their particular agencies to one another by posting the most important information about those agencies to our online map (e.g., services provided, numbers served, numbers serving, hours, funding, brief history, etc.). Where appropriate, students will also upload to our map images of their sites as well as brief video interviews with supervisors at those agencies. Student work will be evaluated for accuracy, thoroughness, and visual accessibility.

II. During the second part of the course, students will use the map they have created to examine the challenges geography and the lack of affordable transportation options pose those served by their agencies (e.g., the distance, time, and cost to drive from Raphine to the nearest dentist accepting new Medicaid patients, to the nearest birthing facility, or to the nearest store with fresh produce). Special attention will be given to the disparity between services and volunteer efforts within the cities (especially near the university) and those in the outer reaches of the county. Student work will be evaluated on the insightfulness of the challenge they decide to highlight and the visual clarity of their illustration.

III. In the third and final part of the course, students will collaborate on two additional, complementary maps (ideally to be overlain atop the previous one): a) Map 1: "Rockbridge 2015" will triage agencies in immediate need of W&L student volunteer efforts, with needs color-coded by interest area (health, education, economic development, etc.); and Map 2: "Rockbridge 2020" will imagine new agencies, new transportation solutions, agency relocations, etc. that promise to make ours a better community for all, especially for the most disadvantaged among us. Student work will be evaluated on the persuasiveness of the argument for making an agency a volunteer priority and for the creativity, practicality, and potential impact of a proposed solution.

IV. Following the course, these three maps will continue to make an impact. Needless to say, the primary map will remain a living document to be supplemented and amended in subsequent terms by future Poverty 102 students. It will also serve to visualize structural obstacles facing poor, rural communities for students of Poverty 101, among other courses across campus. "Rockbridge 2015," of course, will be made available to student organizations and others within and without the Shepherd Program to guide philanthropy and service efforts. As the map becomes fuller and fuller, it will also serve as a useful guide for those working on the AmeriCorps VISTA project, for Bonner volunteers, for students doing community-based research (e.g., recent student work on mapping hunger in Rockbridge), and for Nabors Service League's Impact Area efforts.

The overall goals of this mapping and data visualization project are to develop: 1) student understanding of the structural obstacles facing low-income, rural community members (specifically, those right here in the Rockbridge area); 2) student ability to formulate, alone and in collaboration with others, creative solutions to pressing moral and social problems (e.g., the transportation and nutrition problems in Rockbridge County); 3) student confidence in the use of visualizing technologies needed to lead increasingly visual communities towards humane, responsible solutions to those pressing problems.