The Complexities of Community-Based Websites

Ann Bomberger and Michelle Homan

Abstract

This article describes the development and ongoing operations of the GreenEriePA. org project, a portal to all things environmental in Erie County, PA. Through regular input from community partners, GreenEriePA turned into a much larger, long-term project than the faculty coordinators at Gannon University, Erie, PA, originally anticipated. We utilize Eckerle Curwood and others' (2011) framework for planning long-term community-based learning projects to reflect upon community-based websites and to make recommendations.

The World Wide Web turned twenty-five in the United States in 2014. It is now possible for anyone with an Internet connection and basic computer literacy to make a website for free and post their content nearly immediately. Cell phones are owned by 90 percent of American adults and about two-thirds of them access the Internet through their phones (Pew Research Center 2014). Despite these changes in technological access, many people still have a conception of the web as a place to put information, pictures, or images up for others to consume (called Web 1.0), rather than as an interactive, dynamic experience between web creator(s) and users (called Web 2.0) or among users and their phones/apps (sometimes called Web 3.0). This was certainly the assumption that we had going in to the GreenEriePA project and that, occasionally, we still struggle with today.

Thousands of websites with broken links and outdated information exist. Nonprofits and universities may contribute to the creation of such sites. Small nonprofits sometimes do not prioritize updating web content or social media due to thinly stretched resources (Mansfield 2012; McMahon, Seaman, and Buckingham 2011; Greenberg and MacAulay 2009). Some may not have adequate search engine optimization, making their sites difficult to find. Additional reasons include lack of marketing professionals on staff (Bennett 2014), insufficient levels of technological literacy (Greenberg and MacAulay 2009), and staff turnover. Universities often use short-term grant funds to document and evaluate community-based learning projects (Vogel, Seifer, and Gelmon 2010) and often do not have resources to maintain projects for the long term.

Given how search engines work, for websites to be effective today, they need not only concise, clear, regularly updated content, but frequent social media posts, a time-consuming process for nonprofits and Community-Based Learning Project websites as well. This case study describes the collaborative experience of Gannon University faculty members with eleven local environmental nonprofit partners to create and

sustain an environmental portal for Erie County, Pennsylvania – http://GreenEriePA.
org – showcasing accomplishments and pitfalls of the project. The site launched in
2012 and received 40,237 hits last year.

Project History and Vision

Gannon University is located within the City of Erie, Pennsylvania, working in close
partnership with the community to seek solutions to urban problems and to highlight
community assets. In 2010, Gannon launched the Erie-Gannon Alliances to Improve
Neighborhood Sustainability (Erie-GAINS) initiative to coordinate a series of
projects aimed at improving the sustainability and viability of downtown Erie and
the surrounding neighborhoods. Gannon is pursuing these projects by forming
community partnerships and identifying community needs that align with strengths
of the university.

One of the goals of Erie-GAINS is to enhance environmental awareness in downtown
Erie, a task charged to the Erie-GAINS Environmental Sustainability subcommittee,
comprised of a representative from the environmental nonprofit community, a large
local business, the County Health Department, and various Gannon faculty, staff, and
students. In 2011, the subcommittee recognized a need in the region for a "green
guide" website that would offer a one-stop site for all things environmental in Erie
such as information on recycling, parks/recreation, community gardens, green building
resources, energy efficiency, and local businesses offering green products and services.
Many large cities and regions have green guides that help map community
environmental assets and point users to environmental resources (for example, http://
www.growwny.org/ and http://www.seattle.gov/living-in-seattle/environment). Smaller
cities and rural areas, however, often do not have the resources to develop such portal
sites, and already thinly stretched green nonprofits do not always have the
infrastructure to get their own message to the public let alone bring together the
messages of a variety of community stakeholders (McMahon, Seaman, and
Buckingham 2011).

In order to meet the community need for an online green guide, GreenEriePA.org
was created. The site contains how-to articles (How to Protect Lake Erie, How to
Compost) and profiles of community groups and projects (like the Mending Place, a
project that teaches refugees how to sew and repair clothes while giving them a living
wage). Faculty members from the English and the environmental science and
engineering departments, both a part of the Erie-GAINS sustainability committee,
applied for and received a grant from the Erie Community Foundation to develop
and launch the website.

The scholarship of Darby and her colleagues (Darby et al. 2013) as well as others such
as Bell, Carlson, Martin, SeBlonka, Tryon, Vernon, Foster, and Worral that studies
community partner perspectives notes the importance of long-term projects, greater
faculty involvement, and greater student accountability.

The GreenEriePA project has included substantial faculty involvement, both in community partner interaction and in student supervision and has been undertaken with an understanding of its long-term nature.

The GreenEriePA faculty viewed the creation of the site to be important not only for increased environmental literacy among the community but also for the impact on student learning. Service-learning scholars have long touted the value of the "ill-structured problem" that students in service-learning courses encounter. Most of the world's issues are very complicated and messy and require long-term, multi-pronged courses of action. Long-term, community-based learning courses help students see themselves as part of a much larger team working on a complex issue. As Michelle Simmons notes (2010), "Balancing civic engagement for students, useful documents for a community, literacy research for students and professors, and sustainability for our programs requires thinking of community writing projects in broader terms than a single course." We also viewed this project as a valuable endeavor for student interns because of its interdisciplinary, "real world" communication challenge, and in its further development of technological, organizational, and writing skills. Simmons further notes, "Sometimes learning and understanding occurs between courses – in the spaces where students make connections among the work in one class with the work in other classes to form their understanding of literacy, writing, and communication."

Site Content and Operations

An important component of this project includes regular input, evaluation, and feedback from community partners. As Tryon, Hilgendorf, and Scott (2009), Sandy and Holland (2006), and Malm and others (2012) have noted, relationships, communication, and reciprocity are key to successful long-term university-community partnerships. Once the first grant was received, an entire year was devoted to seeking feedback, organizing, and drafting the first phase of the site. Three formal meetings were held with all community partners before and after the site launch along with numerous one-on-one meetings with specific partners. Initial input was obtained at a meeting with eleven community partners. At this meeting, the goal of the project was discussed and community partners were asked to describe what features and content they would like to see on the website. This initial meeting was very helpful in identifying priorities and providing an opportunity for the community partners to become involved in various aspects of the project. A second meeting with the same group was held approximately six months after the website launch. This provided the opportunity for the group to review the site and offer interim feedback. Much of the feedback was incorporated after this second meeting. One of the recommendations from the community partners was that it would be helpful to know when new material was added to the website. This resulted in the development and distribution of a monthly e-newsletter that focuses on a particular issue, drawn from the website content, and which highlights upcoming events, providing a direct link to the events calendar. Due to community partner input, the site has other features that make it more dynamic and user friendly. In addition to the e-newsletter, we created a Facebook site,

events calendar, videos, maps, and a Twitter account, none of which were initially envisioned by the faculty spearheading the project.

Many of these features are run by student interns with supervision from faculty and community partners, resulting in some periods with a lot of social media activity and engagement and others with less social media engagement. We currently have 400 Facebook "Likes," 211 e-newsletter subscribers, and 130 Twitter "Followers." While those numbers are respectable, they are not as large as might be anticipated for our region. Outreach and marketing must be a long-term part of any such project and has been one of our key struggles. Our number of site visits has grown over time, but making this happen was much more involved than we initially anticipated. We have noticed in the last six months that we have gained more Likes and Followers even when we didn't particularly try to reach out to the public in additional ways, a result that can occur with time and consistency.

Some of the articles and videos are created by students as service-learning projects in various writing classes, while other articles are written by paid interns or by community partners themselves. The faculty member teaching the writing class contacts the community partner in advance of the assignment to see if the partner would be willing to be interviewed and to critique the draft on a short time line. The professor also critiques drafts of articles and videos to ensure accuracy and quality (see assignment in Appendix A for further details). In-class oral and written reflections are done at several steps of the process to help students think through the service-learning experience. At least once a year, the site is reviewed in its entirety to see which articles need to be updated.

To ensure consistency across the website, a style guide was created outlining the number of words per article, approximate number of links in each article, content for each article, number of photos, etc. Photos were used from either our community stakeholders, our interns, some volunteers, or Creative Commons, storing extras in a group Flickr.com account.

Another key factor to increasing visitors to the site was to ensure that GreenEriePA would be visible within search results related to environmental topics in Erie, PA through search engine optimization (SEO). However, just because a site exists and has good SEO, does not mean that it will be found in searches. While the formulas Google uses to rank search results change over time, currently some factors include the frequency with which a site is updated, number of dead links, how often other organizations link to it, and the frequency of its social media. Having keywords not only in the SEO but also early in the stories also increases web traffic. Recently Google has announced that will also take into account how mobile-friendly a site is in its ranking, and other changes to Google's search formulas will no doubt continue to be made.

Factors to Consider When Embarking on a Long-Term, Community-Based Project

There are many factors to take into account when considering the development and operation of an ambitious community-based project. Universities, unfortunately, sometimes assume that they have the capacity to fill a community need before doing a thorough assessment of the institutional, departmental, and individual will for the project (Eckerle Curwood et al. (2011). In this section we apply some of the questions developed by Eckerle Curwood and others (2011) to assess collaboration readiness for universities and academics embarking on community-based learning. We have quoted their chart in its entirety here, but only apply those most relevant to our project in the body of this article. We did not have this set of questions until we were years into the project, and it raises some challenging questions for us. Would we have embarked on the project if we had realized all of the implications? We are not sure of the answer to that question. Yet we do not mean these questions to dissuade future ambitious projects like GreenEriePA; we just offer them because we think they would be useful in thinking through some of the complexities of community-based websites.

Collaboration Readiness Questions for Universities and Academics from Eckerle Curwood et al. (2011, 23)

Contextual Factors

1. What is the current university commitment to community-engaged scholarship?
   a. University– Does the university mission have a focus on community? How is community-engaged scholarship recognized in promotion and tenure processes? Are appropriate vehicles for risk management in place?
   b. Department– Is a commitment to community-engaged scholarship central or peripheral to curriculum development and faculty time allocation?
   c. Individual faculty members– What is the level of commitment individual faculty members have to community engagement? Do faculty teaching the associated courses have the appropriate pedagogical background?
2. What type of resources are available for partnership formation and for the work of the partnership? Has appropriate attention been paid to financial, space, and human resources?
3. What type of data management infrastructure is in place? Does the data management infrastructure facilitate or impede the full participation of community partners in the research?

Between-Group Factors

1. Are there congruent visions and values between the university and community partners? Is there a common language, or do you need to work to develop a common understanding and language?

2. Have you identified communication processes appropriate to all partners?

3. Do you have appropriate mechanisms for sharing power, responsibility, and authority with a community partner? What benefits will the community partner realize from the partnership?

4. What will collaboration look like for your groups? Is there trust and mutual respect between the partners? Is there a clear understanding of the resources and constraints that each partner brings to the table? Is a Memorandum of Understanding in place? How will the success of the partnership be evaluated?

Within-Group Factors

1. How will you address resistance for community-engaged practice among students and faculty?

2. What mechanisms are in place for sharing power, responsibility, and authority among students?

3. How will you manage continuity of the partnership and the research project as students and faculty change? What is the anticipated level of turnover, and what effect might this have on the partnership?

Contextual Factors: University Commitment to Community-Based Learning

The GreenEriePA project has had a fair amount of institutional support from Gannon University. The university's strategic plan lists in its vision statement, "innovative academic programs that are connected to community needs and focused on creating public impact" and "promoting student learning such that graduates embrace their roles and responsibilities as world citizens." The GreenEriePA project fits squarely with those goals, and so some funding and support from the university has been received. The offices of community and governmental relations, marketing, service-learning along with the English, environmental science and engineering, and communications departments have all helped by allocating substantial time and/or funding toward the project. Two work-study positions have been allocated to the project, and we have received three mini-grants from Erie-GAINS and the provost's office. We have not always received the kind of help that would be desirable in our ongoing marketing efforts, however; something that no doubt many institutions face when a project is no longer new.

The support for community-engaged scholarship has been more mixed. Gannon has long employed the Boyer model in its evaluation of faculty, but only recently updated its Institutional Policy Manual to include "scholarship of engagement." As Hoyt (2013) notes, scholarship of engagement "is an integrated view of scholarly activity

where research, teaching, service, and professional practice overlap and are mutually reinforcing. . . .Instead of seeing ourselves as experts who produce knowledge for laypersons, we aim to generate and discover knowledge by way of collaboration" (Hoyt 2013, 7). As a result, it challenges some of the assumptions of academic review processes. Guest speakers and consultants like community-based research scholars Barbara Holland and Cathy Jordan have met with our faculty, provost, and tenure and promotion committees. This is an issue many campuses are struggling with, yet one that is making inroads in faculty review processes across the country.

Between-Group Factors: Communication with Partners

As we mentioned earlier, community partners were and are regularly consulted in the formation and evaluation of the website. One of the challenges when working with many community partners – each with their own specific interests and agendas – is to keep them engaged and connected. Developing relationships, a key to successful long-term service-learning projects, are more challenging when working with multiple organizations rather than a single group. GreenEriePA faculty and students staff outreach booths at various environmental events to pass out brochures and promotional products (i.e., refrigerator magnets, pens) with the website logo and address. By participating in these outreach activities, faculty and students became better acquainted with environmental partners during down times. As a result we attended various partner activities and meetings to support and promote their initiatives. Bringing an e-newsletter sign-up sheet also increased the number of visitors to the site, both from community partners and from the public at large, thereby increasing, in an admittedly one-sided way, communication.

A user survey was created in SurveyGismo (http://bit.ly/GEPASurvey) and emailed to partners, posted on the website, e-newsletter, Facebook, and Twitter pages about one year after the website launch. After repeated posts, a total of only twenty-two surveys were completed. Approximately 55 percent of respondents reported visiting the website once per week or several times per month. All of the respondents indicated that they agree or strongly agree with the statements, "I would recommend GreenEriePA to others" and "The information on the website is useful to me in my personal life." Some of the most helpful information came from the open-ended questions such as, "What do you like most about GreenEriePA?" Several respondents mentioned that they liked having all the environmental information available through one website. One respondent answered, "Helped me compile a residential calendar on green tips and practices. I used both verbiage, ideas, and organizations within the calendar for our residents to reference. This was mailed to 28,500 households!" In response to, "What would you like to see improved?" a number of individuals reported that they would like to see improvement in the navigation and look of the website.

Over time, the faculty worked regularly with the staff at Environment Erie to request story ideas and names of contacts. Environment Erie is a well-established nonprofit in

the area that provides environmental outreach and education and provides resources to develop and promote environmental restoration projects. In 2014, Environment Erie and GreenEriePA have been collaborating closely on a merger between the two sites, with organizers and interns meeting every other week. These regular meetings have increased collaboration on the e-newsletter as well.

Sharing Power and Responsibility with Community Partners

Initially, this was primarily a Gannon initiative with a lot of feedback from a variety of community partners. Over time, it has shifted more toward being a true collaboration between Environment Erie and Gannon, although it is still an uneven relationship.

How to allocate funds has raised some issues related to this new merger. Since Gannon initially was spearheading the project with feedback from community partners, external grant funds went to Gannon resources, primarily in the form of student interns. A considerable portion of the GreenEriePA project consisted of in-kind funding through volunteer hours and, later, two work-study positions. The first two external grants that we received went almost entirely to student intern wages to get the site up and running (one from the Erie Community Foundation in 2011 and another from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection in 2014). Graduate students fact checked, researched, proofread, and posted the articles, teaching themselves the web development software, Google Analytics, Hootsuite and other programs. In 2013, a work-study student position was dedicated to the site, and in 2014, a second work-study position was added.

Faculty have been heavily involved in mentoring, organizing, and reviewing drafts throughout the process. Faculty stipends had been built into one of the grants, but the faculty decided to divert the funds to student wages to help keep the project going. This lack of faculty stipend may dissuade some faculty from embarking on such an undertaking, but as others have noted, sometimes community-based learning faculty are motivated by things other than money. Wade and Demb (2009), for example, suggest factors for community-based learning can be institutional, professional, and/or personal. Russell-Stamp's research at a teaching university (2015) further explored motivations for faculty involvement in community-based learning.

While some grant recipients spend the money on professional website companies, we wanted to emphasize content and the development of our students' skills. We used the website development tool Weebly Pro, which we were able to use for under $125 a year (there are free versions as well). There are a variety of such web development tools by different companies (Wix, Squarespace, etc.) and each platform has its strengths and weaknesses. As a result, the initial iteration of the site looked more "home grown" (Figure 1) than the current website. The choice of a more visually centered platform, like Wix, or the involvement of graphic design faculty, might have strengthened the aesthetics and formatting from the beginning.

Figure 1. GreenEriePA version created on Weeby Pro.

With the merger of the two sites, Environment Erie wanted the GreenEriePA site to match the Environment Erie site, requiring a move from the nearly free Weebly Pro site to a company that runs the Environment Erie site, at a substantial cost. This cost was paid by Gannon University, the Nonprofit Partnership of Erie, and Environment Erie. Initially the idea of the cost for the site redesign gave the GreenEriePA creators pause, but ultimately we agreed that this would be an important way to merge the sites and deepen collaboration. It also allowed us to have a calendar that can be filtered, a feature long requested by community partners, but which is not available in Google Calendar. Finally, the redesign put money into a small local business. The financial contribution of all parties has been a testament to their faith in the value of the collaboration over the project.

Another financial point with differing opinions has been regarding whether there will be ads on the site. This was raised as a possibility from the beginning by community partners, yet it is something the involved faculty has resisted to avoid having to make

calls about whether a business is truly "green" or not based on its willingness to advertise. This has been a luxury that we have long avoided and one that we will likely have to face again in the future to help sustain the site. We have considered incorporating faculty from the school of business to help us chart a feasible, ethical financial plan, yet no decisions have been made at this point.

Within-Group Factors: Collaboration within the Gannon Community

We did not encounter much resistance from students and faculty about community-engaged practice, but we did have some challenges related to within-group factors in a variety of ways. As we hinted at earlier, we did not always have – and still do not – have some of the disciplines that would have been useful at the table. Not only would it be useful to have school business faculty involved in the discussion, but the experts in graphics, public relations, and photography would also be valuable contributors. One of the challenges with large-scale projects is to figure out how much is do-able and what is not given the logistical challenges of passing multiple projects off, not only among community partners but among a variety of classes. At a small university such as Gannon, collaboration is, in some ways, easier than at larger universities because of the culture, but in others ways more difficult in the sense that there is typically only one expert in a particular field, and if he or she is not interested in community-based learning, the collaboration is not going to happen.

We also faced some internal challenges regarding emphasis on assessment by the university and community foundation. We were asked to define project outcomes that were measurable beyond numbers of website hits, something that is very challenging to do given the nature of our project. To illustrate, one of the initial project outcomes was that the website would increase recycling rates within the City of Erie. We were hesitant to enact this as an outcome to begin with and as the project progressed it became obvious that this outcome was not realistic since recycling rates are difficult to measure over time, influenced by multiple factors, and even more difficult to associate with one activity. Even an outcome such as "increasing the public's awareness of recycling" is difficult to measure quantitatively. Certainly a survey that queries website users about their knowledge can be conducted, but the difficulty lies in specifically linking someone's change in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors directly to website content. Google Analytics can track how many times one of our recycling pages was looked at (7,899 page views in the past year), but these are indirect measures.

Turnover Issues

Student interns have also done a good job of mentoring one another, teaching each other skills and processes. So far there has been a relatively smooth transition from one student intern to another. The issue of staff turnover is more complex. The site almost completely collapsed when one of the faculty had to withdraw from the project, and shortly, thereafter, the main Environment Erie contact left his job. High staff

turnover is not uncommon in the nonprofit world, and while faculty turnover in academia is less prevalent, "life happens," and creating plans to provide for a change in project coordinators is important to do (Eckerle Curwood et al. 2011). This is an issue we are making steps to remedy, but building capacity takes a lot of time.

Conclusion

Overall the website project has been a very positive experience on a number of fronts, including student learning and engagement, university-community partnerships, increased environmental literacy, and professional development of faculty. It has also been challenging in terms of the time commitment and resources necessary to maintain it for the long term. The framework developed by Eckerle Curwood and others (2011) allowed us to conduct a qualitative retrospective assessment of our project. We have refined this framework in order to develop a set of recommendations when developing a community-based website as noted below.

Factors to Consider When Developing a Community-Based Website

- Assess institutional support including financial resources and personnel necessary to develop and maintain website on a long-term basis.
- Assess faculty interest and ability to maintain the site on a long-term basis including promotion/tenure issues.
- Involve community partners early on in and throughout the development process.
- Involve personnel who understand how websites and search engines work.
- Develop a long-term marketing plan to promote and increase awareness about the site.
- Social media is an important component of websites.
- Conduct periodic evaluation which may include website analytics, user surveys, and community partner feedback.
- Regularly update website content and ensure site and links are working properly.
- Involve students in developing website content by incorporating components into course assignments and through internships and/or work-study.

Appendix A

GreenEriePA.org Assignment

"Real world" writing projects often teach audience, situation, and purpose more effectively because they have genuine, hybrid audiences and because people and situations are complicated. This assignment provides you with an opportunity to develop a document for your professional portfolio while teaching you about Erie's environmental assets and challenges. If published, as most of your pieces will be, you will also be taking part in a long-term project that helps Erie residents learn more about the environment in their community.

Task: You will write a profile of a local environmental organization or issue. Most of these pieces will be published on GreenEriePA.org. which serves as a green guide to

Erie individuals and businesses. GreenEriePA highlights successful green initiatives in Erie County while serving as a portal to local green organizations and opportunities. It provides how-to's for individuals and businesses wanting to save money while helping the environment.

Due dates
- Contact your interviewee **today** to set up an appointment (in person or by phone) to discuss the topic. Do research to prepare for the interview and prepare questions.
- Have an appointment set up by Friday, Feb. 6.
- Read your contact person's website, and be prepared to give a brief, informal presentation about it in class. Read your assigned articles from Environment Erie and GreenEriePA. 2/10
- Thursday, February 12: Rough draft due by class time.
  - ◆ Email a copy to your contact person and cc Prof. Bomberger.
  - ◆ Post in Blackboard
  - ◆ Bring in a hard copy to class.
- Thursday, Feb. 19: Bring one hard copy to class for session on proofreading. Fix any errors found, and post in Blackboard by 5 p.m. Please hand in peer reviews in class and make sure I have the feedback from your community partner.

Grading criteria for profile
- All feedback from community partner was handed in and followed.
- Engaging, relevant hook and conclusion.
- Precisely focused on your topic, no extra material or words.
- Shows a clear consideration of audience.
- Engaging, precise prose.
- Helps us understand what the organization does and why it is important.
- Links to relevant other sources (their website and/or other).
- Grammatically perfect.
- 500-600 words.

Topics available for you to choose from:
1. Destination Erie updated article with an environmental focus: http://www.planerieregion.com/ Contact person's name, email, and phone number
2. Pennsylvania's Energy Loans – mainly web research, but some calling to verify if information is current. http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/grants_loans_tax_credits/10395 http://www.greeneriepa.org/pennsylvanias-energy-loans-and-incentives-programs.html
3. Update the Jr. PLEWA article on Environment Erie site (it's from 2011). Contact person's name, email, and phone number
4. Environmental Programming of Erie Zoo. Contact person's name, email, and phone number
5. This area's chapter of the Sierra Club. http://www.lakeeriegroup.webs.com/Contact person's name, email, and phone number
6. Presque Isle Audubon Society. Contact person's name, email, and phone number

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