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Student Sarah Thiede works with Extension Center for Community Vitality

Summary: Thiede's work includes data analysis on local food systems in Renville County.

(January 19, 2012)-Extension is a nationwide program that partners with more than 100 land grant colleges and universities with a mission to engage in teaching, research, and extension. University of Minnesota Extension fulfills its mission by providing programming for the public. The Extension Center for Community Vitality engages communities across many different topics, from ways to promote your small business to developing leadership skills. In west central Minnesota, the focus is on supporting the vitality of small towns.

To better evaluate how effective these courses are, Extension partnered with the University of Minnesota, Morris Center for Small Towns (CST) for the services of a data analysis assistant. One of the longest running student positions in CST's history, the position is currently held by Sarah Thiede '14, Cottage Grove, a French and English major with secondary education. Thiede inputs Extension course evaluations into a database to determine and analyze trends and patterns. She is supervised by Extension Research Fellow Ben Winchester '95 to complete this work.

Thiede is currently working on a set of 282 surveys examining local foods systems in Renville County, her largest evaluation yet. The surveys examine farmers markets, determining who utilizes them and how to get people to buy more locally grown food. When she's not working on surveys, Thiede works on research projects such as an examination of the economic effect of leadership programs in rural Minnesota.

Thiede says "I think it's really cool what I get to do." She feels that she's learning a lot from this experience and learning about a lot of places in Minnesota she didn't know about. When she doesn't recognize a town from a survey, she looks it up. "It's really widening my perspective of rural communities in Minnesota."

The Extension Center for Community Vitality makes a difference by engaging Minnesotans to strengthen the social, civic, economic, and technological capacity of their communities. The center helps communities choose their future by informing the decisions they make improving the processes they use when they make decisions enhancing the skills, ability, and confidence of the people who lead and decide and increasing the number of people who step up to lead and decide. For more information, visit www.extension.umn.edu/community

The University of Minnesota, Morris Center for Small Towns is a community outreach program housed on the Morris campus that serves as a point-of-entry to the resources of the University of Minnesota. Small towns, local units of government, K-12 schools, nonprofit organizations, and other University units are able to utilize CST's resources as they work on rural issues or make contributions to rural society. CST's mission is to focus the University's attention and marshal its resources toward assisting Minnesota's small towns with locally identified issues while creating applied learning opportunities for faculty and students.

Through personal and academic discovery, the University of Minnesota, Morris provides opportunities for students to grow

intellectually, engage in community, experience environmental stewardship and celebrate diversity. A renewable and sustainable educational experience, Morris prepares graduates for careers, for advanced degrees, for lifelong learning, for work world flexibility in the future, and for global citizenship. Learn more about Morris at morris.umn.edu or call 888-866-3382.