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University of Minnesota, Morris student Thomas Roloff '11 helps small cities thrive

Summary: Through the Center for Small Towns, Roloff is working with the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission.

(November 2, 2011)-Many small towns are struggling to maintain identities, businesses, and populations. It is a daunting task to plan for the future while just trying to maintain what you have. But planning isn't an option. It's a necessity. Helping small towns plan for the future is a job that is "completely worth it," according to University of Minnesota, Morris student Thomas Roloff '11, Pine Springs. Through the Center for Small Towns at Morris, Roloff is working with the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission (UMVRDC) to reach their smallest towns regarding community planning.

The project's goal is to help the smallest of communities, populations under 500, to identify priorities and provide tools, ideas, and resources to reach community goals. In this economy, many communities, big and small, are looking for ways to save money but often need ideas on how to go about doing that.

"When I look at a community, I don't look at what's missing," says Roloff. "I look at what's already there that can be worked with." A forward-looking view like Roloff's brings optimism to small communities. He points out that it's easier to instigate change when you're merely amplifying what already works in the community. Coming to Morris from the Twin Cities area, Roloff realizes how little "back and forth" there is between the urban areas and small towns. Small towns are often overlooked and falsely stereotyped, but the only way, in Roloff's opinion, that both small towns and big cities can survive is through interaction with each other.

Although this project is only for fall semester, Roloff hopes it may turn into an internship after he graduates in December 2011. He says it would be "highly rewarding to get into nonprofit work right out of undergraduate school." Having worked on a somewhat similar project this summer for the town of Winsted, it's clear that Roloff likes finding opportunities for people and communities. He's been able to bring the skills he's learned in college to these positions, from strategic planning to grant writing. He enjoys projects such as this, where he feels he can actually make a difference and help. "Any idea you offer will be considered you don't go unheard."

The mission of the UMVRDC is to "enable the region to thrive through assisting local units of government." Its membership is comprised of representatives of townships, cities, counties, school boards, and public interest groups. Geographically, the UMVRDC represents the counties of Big Stone, Chippewa, Lac qui Parle, Swift, and Yellow Medicine. They are designated as Region 6W. For more information, visit them [online](#)

Funding for this project comes from the University of [Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs](#) (CURA) Community Assistantship Program (CAP). CURA connects the resources of the University of Minnesota with the interests and needs of urban communities and the region for the benefit of all. CURA pursues its urban and regional mission by facilitating and supporting connections between state and local governments, neighborhoods, and nonprofit organizations, and relevant resources at the University, including faculty and students from appropriate campuses,

colleges, centers, or departments.

The Community Assistantship Program (CAP) provides applied research assistance to community-based groups outside the Twin Cities Metro Area. The research and technical needs of community organizations are matched with the support of talented students. The idea is simple: get the resources of a great University working with communities to address the significant issues facing the people of Minnesota. CAP projects typically place students in a community defined and directed part time research assistantship for one semester or during the summer. Students are selected by and report to the community organization. Throughout the project students are supported by a community supervisor, faculty, and community mentors.

The [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.