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Center for Small Towns is decade old

Summary:

(February 17, 2005)-It is the year 1995. While the prosecution began delivering opening statements in the O.J. Simpson trial and then-President Bill Clinton was beginning his third year in office, somewhere in a little office on a small liberal arts college in west central Minnesota, the Center for Small Towns was born. Brainchild of then-University of Minnesota, Morris Chancellor Dave Johnson, the Center may have started out small, but had large dreams in assisting small towns. Until his retirement in June 2004, Roger Mc Cannon recruited resources, and built a solid and lasting program.

The focus of the Center has not changed much in the 10 years of its existence: as part of Continuing Education and Regional Programs (CERP), it remains the primary outreach unit for the University of Minnesota, Morris. By brokering University and staff resources, the Center is able to assist small towns, local units of government, K-12 schools, and non-profit organizations in rural west central Minnesota communities to successfully transition through this period of rapid change in rural America.

From 1994-1997, the Center received a Community Collaborative grant from the MN Higher Education Services office and the MN Campus Compact. UMM faculty, staff, and students helped to build environmental learning areas around the West Central Area School built in Barrett after a recent, and difficult, consolidation. This initiative helped to unite the small towns of Barrett, Elbow Lake, Hoffman, Kensington, and Wendell as they embraced a common vision. The schools then integrated environmentally friendly content into their curriculum. This was the first service-learning grant awarded to UMM.

Along with University funding, a key financial and program building aspect has been a relationship with the Blandin Foundation. The Center facilitated the Community Investment Partnership (BCIP) program, a nine-step community visioning and planning process implemented in the Morris, Big Stone Lake, and Traverse County areas. A second Blandin Foundation grant provided funding to strengthen many of the Center's existing programs.

More recently, the Data Analysis and Research (DAR) component of the Center produced the Rural Media Study for the Minnesota Initiative Foundations. In essence, student employees researched how metropolitan newspapers – specifically the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the St. Paul Pioneer Press – portrayed rural areas. The research results showed that urban media largely portrays “rural” as “agricultural,” which, while historically true, is no longer the driving engine of rural areas today.

Since 1995, the Center has served over 200 communities, engaged over 1,000 UMM students, and involved dozens of UMM faculty members from all disciplines. Financially, the Center has leveraged more than \$700,000 to UMM, more than \$900,000 to communities in the region.

It is now the year 2005. The Center for Small Towns is rooted into the communities of west central Minnesota. Many

residents and community organizations have expressed appreciation for the program and the support of the Center. The enthusiastic staff of the Center are proud of the progress made in developing these programs and are eager to continue their work with residents in the region.

The staff at the Center appreciates the many contributions by faculty, staff, and students at UMM, and by community residents over the past 10 years, which helped to benefit the region's communities.

(Contributed by Emily A. Elsner '05, student administrative assistant for the Center for Small Towns, UMM.)

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.