

# An Investment in the Future: Reflections on Experiential Learning and Bus Rapid Transit Evaluation

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In early 2007, Lane Transit District (LTD) launched the EmX bus rapid transit system in the cities of Eugene and Springfield. After two years of unexpectedly high ridership on the pilot route of the EmX, LTD staff began looking at ways to evaluate the new system. Because bus rapid transit (BRT) is a relatively new transportation option in the United States, LTD faced an evaluation process unlike any they had done before.

LTD recognized a need for additional outreach to the community and key stakeholders. To help achieve this goal, Community Planning Workshop (CPW), a service and experiential learning program at the University of Oregon, received a grant from the Oregon Transportation Research and Education Consortium (OTREC) and



EmX bus rapid transit vehicle

partnered with LTD. Together, CPW and LTD worked to assess stakeholder perceptions of the EmX and create a framework for how to conduct an evaluation of the system. In addition to the long-term benefits for the LTD and the community, this project provided graduate students a multi-disciplinary experiential learning opportunity that helped them develop the skills needed for a career in transportation planning.

For nine months, university students worked under the direction of CPW's director Bob Parker to conduct an extensive outreach program that involved stakeholder interviews, document review, focus group facilitation, case study analysis, and the distribution and analysis of online surveys. CPW developed six deliverables for Lane Transit District:

1. **Stakeholder Perceptions Document:** This document compiles and analyzes the perceptions of four stakeholder groups regarding the EmX planning and environmental review process. It includes recommendations to improve this process.
2. **Evaluation Framework Document:** This document organizes and prioritizes the criteria stakeholders use to evaluate the success of the EmX. The document also provides measures with which to evaluate these criteria.
3. **Business Perceptions Report:** This document analyzes the results of a survey distributed to the business community in Eugene and Springfield.

4. **Fairmount Neighborhood Survey Report:** This document analyzes the results of a survey distributed to residents of the Fairmount Neighborhood, a neighborhood adjacent to the pilot route of the EmX.
5. **Website Evaluation Report:** This report examined the LTD website to find out if it provides the information that stakeholders want. It includes recommendations to improve the website to better meet stakeholder needs.
6. **Bus Rapid Transit Case Study Report:** This report compiles case studies of five bus rapid transit systems around the country. In particular, it includes information about how these systems were developed and how they are evaluated.

In June 2009, CPW presented their recommendations to the LTD board and presented their reports to LTD staff. Collectively, CPW's products outline stakeholder perceptions of the EmX system and create a framework for future evaluation of the system. The products helped to initiate a broader community dialogue about the EmX. LTD is already using recommendations in the report to improve communications regarding the planning and development of the EmX. For example, according to Tom Schwetz, LTD's Director of Planning & Development, "LTD has organized meetings to get many different planning departments within the City of Eugene involved in LTD outreach, rather than just working through one individual. "

## **Service-learning: It benefits both communities and students**

The results of research are important, but how the research is conducted is also important to consider as communities and organizations look for innovative and affordable ways to address transportation issues. Can experiential learning (also called service learning) be a realistic strategy to help communities deal with some transportation planning issues in resource limited environments? If so, what is the best way to structure the partnership and prepare and support the students involved? This document describes how we structured our experiential learning process.

A core principle of service-learning is that community projects must be sensitive to the direct needs and context of that community. Therefore our model may not work for in every community, but we hope that through sharing our experience, other communities, faculty, and students will consider service learning as a viable method for addressing many community transportation issues.

Mary Archer, a LTD planner who worked closely with the students, said she was "impressed by how much work the CPW Team did and the level at which they did it." She started the project with a few worries that the students were taking on more than they could accomplish in six months, but as the project progressed the confidence of the students gave her confidence in the project. Speaking about the CPW student team, Archer noted the students' professionalism and said that "they took their roles, both as observers and as facilitators, very seriously."

## A Unique Educational Experience

Unlike many other student projects, seasoned experts in transportation planning contributed to this EmX evaluation project. Students received guidance from a leading transportation and land use consultant, Terry Moore and from Leon Skiles, a transit consultant. This input benefited both the students involved in the project and the deliverables produced for the transit district. The students got to interact directly with people very knowledgeable about the subject area.



CPW student team with project advisor Bob Parker (far right)

The expertise of these planning professionals helped to establish a framework for completing the project and provided content for the documents that the students produced. LTD also benefited from receiving expert guidance on these documents.

Another aspect of this project that differed from other projects was that rather than being defined initially, the deliverables produced for LTD were defined through collaboration between CPW and the client. First, CPW gathered input from the client about what information would be useful to them. Next, CPW evaluated those ideas to determine what deliverables would be feasible while creating a well-rounded learning experience. Developing these deliverables with both learning and client goals in mind simultaneously, rather than sequentially, resulted in an experience that was particularly beneficial for both the students and the transit district. The benefits of service learning were easily captured and identifiable.

## Strengths of a Service Learning Partnership: LTD Perspective

Partnering with a university benefits clients in a variety of ways. One benefit is that CPW's work allows clients to receive new and different types of input. Tom Schwetz, director of planning for LTD, was excited about having an outside perspective on LTD's BRT planning process in an environment that might make stakeholders feel comfortable expressing their true opinions. Involving students also may have encouraged stakeholders to participate who might not have otherwise taken extra time to work with LTD. In addition, Schwetz said he was excited to partner with CPW to encourage the growth of the transportation-land use sector at the university level. He felt it was "an opportunity I couldn't pass up."

Along with getting different types of input, by partnering with the University, LTD was able to take advantage of new funding streams. The Community Planning Workshop applied to the Oregon Transportation Research and Education Consortium (OTREC) to support the evaluation

process as well as improve the CPW service learning curriculum. Only participating universities can apply for OTREC funding, however they must commit a 1:1 match to receive the awards. In this project, LTD supplied the match for the grant and the University secured the grant funds.

## **Challenges of a Service Learning Partnership: LTD Perspective**

Despite their energy and enthusiasm, students are still students; they may lack the knowledge, skills and experiences of paid professionals. CPW faculty must oversee everything the students do to ensure professional level work. Mary Archer wondered about how the students would be viewed as they interacted with the stakeholders. She felt there was a possibility that the students might say something that could be viewed as naïve and not get honest feedback. She was also worried about the inverse problem; stakeholders might be too open or aggressive. However, Archer noted “students were well-informed and professional and that they received honest, open feedback about LTD.”

The CPW faculty’s role is to ensure that the project is conducted in a professional manner and that the students approach it differently than they would a homework assignment. Students care deeply about their projects and the experience but community members may be apprehensive at first.

Another potential challenge could be schedules and timelines. Universities operate on a semester or term schedule while communities do not. Many potential partners worry about what happens when the students leave and the service learning class is over. CPW has created a structure to accommodate year-round project work. Most of the EmX Evaluation Reports were created between January and June, when the service learning class is taught. However, editing the reports after they were reviewed by the client took continued through the summer of 2009. Therefore, CPW hired graduate students to finish the project. CPW faculty, who work year-round, continued working on the project, provided project consistency, and maintained momentum.

## **Strengths of a Service Learning Partnership: Student Perspective**

The direction of the project was led by LTD staff, which allowed students to really get to know the client. LTD staff met with the CPW project manager monthly during the project. CPW students also conducted focus groups and interviews with LTD staff to understand their needs, gain insight into LTD, and meet the requirements of the project.



CPW students lead a focus group with LTD staff

Moreover, LTD staff provided guidance to the students throughout the project. This gave students an opportunity to interact with professionals. This interaction is important to the success of any project; it provides LTD staff management oversight and learning opportunities for students.

Another advantage to this collaboration was that it exposed student to a particularly broad range of planning skills and techniques. Students led focus groups, interviewed stakeholders, conducted surveys, presented information and facilitated meetings, and synthesized all the ideas into goals and actions. The students also prepared reports and memoranda to support the planning process.

Students responded to the high professional expectations, as explained by a first year graduate student, "One strength our team established early on was a high standard of quality for the work we produced. This was demanded both by our class instructors and the client. We knew we had to show up at each meeting prepared and with work that met our team members' expectations."

### **Challenges of a Service Learning Partnership: Student Perspective**

While CPW works to build a breadth of skills in students, building these skills within a professional environment with students who may have little or no experience with these techniques can be challenging. When many first year graduate students come to the CPW class they have no idea what the experience will be like. Many have never worked directly with a community on a planning or policy project; many have never stood up in front of a group of community members and given a presentation or had to facilitate a difficult conversation. One first year graduate student said, "Previous to this experience, I'd never interviewed or surveyed community groups before. This experience taught me how to successfully interact with a wide variety of individuals in a professional context."

CPW seeks to build skills of many types, from fundamental skills such as writing and analysis, to technical skills and interpersonal skills. Recognizing that each student comes to CPW with different experiences, we must assess each person's strengths and strategically focus skill development in those areas while at the same time encouraging growth in other areas.

Working in a professional environment and a classroom environment simultaneously is also challenging. At times students feel the pressure, "Balancing the demands of CPW work with other coursework is challenging – it could be overwhelming without the right amount of organization." But after a few months of class students learn to balance their schedules - a skill that will come in handy once they start working in a professional position. "I was amazed at how efficient I became," proclaims a student researcher at the end of the year. "Not only has the quality of my work improved, but I am able to take on a larger work load than I ever imagined I would be able to."

## About CPW

Community Planning Workshop is an applied planning, public policy, and economic development research program located in the University of Oregon Community Service Center. CPW provides graduate and undergraduate students with experience working with Oregon communities, organizations, agencies, and individuals assisting to improve economic, environmental, and social conditions in Oregon.

CPW has a staff of six faculty and planning professionals and typically engages 30-40 graduate students in planning-related projects throughout the year. CPW has completed over 300 planning-related projects since 1977.

CPW is also affiliated with the Department of Planning, Public Policy, and Management in the School of Architecture and Allied Arts at the University of Oregon.

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