

# Retail Assistance Program for the Rural Community

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## PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Small towns in the US have been losing their vitality as residents and businesses leave for bigger cities. National retailers and e-commerce left little room for small town entrepreneurs to succeed and survive. These small business owners lack knowledge and resources to compete in this rapidly changing business environment. Erosion of small town businesses is directly linked to decline of the local community because the sense of community disappears without having a place to gather, communicate, and connect in town. To address this critical issue, this collaborative research was conceived. The team consists of faculty members, graduate students, and undergraduate students in Retail Merchandising program and an extension education specialist from the Center for Community Vitality.

## PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The collaborative project was motivated to develop a retail assistance program to increase rural community vitality. The retail assistance program connects student skills and faculty expertise with entrepreneurs of rural communities. Ultimately, the program is intended to not only support small business owners in Minnesota but also enhance student learning.

## SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning or community-based learning, is a high-impact practice that engages students with one another, their institution, and their local community (Kuh, 2008). Evidence shows students' learning is greatly enhanced through service learning. Scholars believe service learning is an effective experiential method that enhances skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and interpersonal relationships (McIntyre, Webb, & Hite, 2005). Service learning also infuses students with the sense of civic responsibility and helps them to have a greater appreciation of the discipline they are in. Importantly, service learning benefits the participants in the process mutually. Through service learning projects, not only the students but also the service recipients, the community members, gain practical and relevant knowledge.

## PROJECT

A project team that consists of 2 faculty members, 2 graduate students, 2 undergraduate students in retail merchandising, and one extension specialist was formed to develop a customized retail assistance program. A small business owner in a rural midwestern town who operates a boutique and a seasonal pop-up stores participated as a community partner. The owner tried out the holiday seasonal pop-up store for two seasons with great success, but was in need of a systematic and strategic evaluation of the space and a marketing and branding strategy. Through a situational analysis and interviews with business owners, the research team identified specific problems to solve.

- Promotion communications for the pop-up store was not organized
- The pop-up store identity was unclear
- The pop-up store layout was confusing and creating traffic flow issues
- The store was dimly lit

## SOLUTIONS

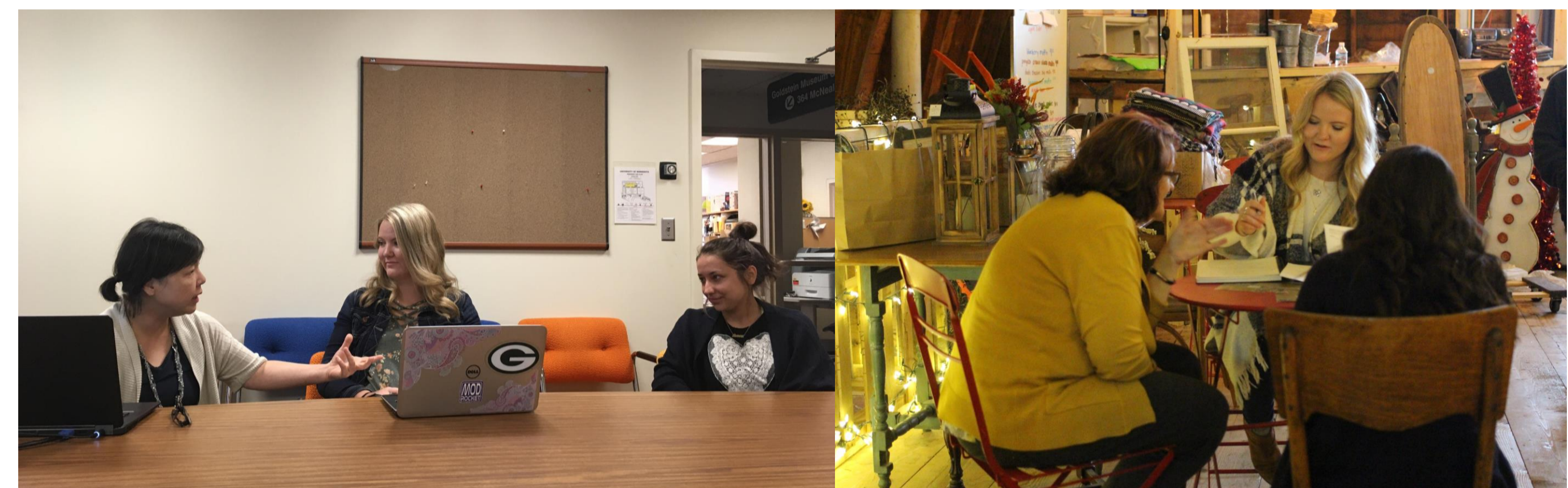
### 1. The Berg's Country Barn store logo

To address the identified problems, the research team developed two plans. The pop-up store identity was developed with a logo. The store logo captured the essence of the store image and the owner's intention. Moreover, the logo was placed on the Facebook page, in the store, and other promotion materials to consistently communicate the store's identity.

### 2. A backdrop in the store

In the deepest part of the store, a backdrop created with wood pallets was built and highlighted with lighting. This wall created a focal point in the large open space to draw traffic into the deep part of the store, guiding the customer traffic to a desirable order.

The students recruited an interdisciplinary team of students and managed the team to execute the plan. The results suggest development of a formalized program can be beneficial for both small towns and students. The success of a single store on the main street of a rural town can boost visitors and create excitement for the whole business community.



## REFERENCES

- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High impact practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- McIntyre, F. S., Webb, D. J., & Hite, R. E. (2005). Service learning in the marketing curriculum: Faculty views and participation. *Marketing Education Review*, 15(1), 35-45.