Now It Gets Real

FIVE YEARS OF STUDY all comes down to LA 975, the capstone course for landscape architecture majors. It’s four months when all the cramming, all the creating, all the acquired knowledge are put to use in the real world, when seniors create a master land use plan for a Kentucky county. Now it’s serious. Now it’s about more than the grade. Now the work affects someone else.

Over the years, counties across the state have benefited from students’ work. Elliott County and Washington County are two of them.

Elliott County
By the mid-1990s, Elliott Countians were looking for ways to showcase their artists and the beauty of their landscape and simultaneously stimulate their economy. Home to Laurel Gorge, one of the most scenic natural gorges in the state, Elliott County was ripe with the potential for attracting tourists and encouraging new businesses.

Gwenda Adkins, Elliott County’s family and consumer sciences extension agent, is one of the most passionate proponents of her Appalachian community. She asked that the 2000 class work on a plan for her county.

Adkins recounts the first time the students met with area residents in a meeting that boasted a surprisingly large turnout for a county with only 6,000 residents. The purpose of that student-run meeting was to open a dialogue, to find out what was important to the community. The students asked, “What’s good about your county? What do you have here that you’re proud of?”

“It was strange,” Adkins said. “At first people got really quiet, because they’re not used to looking at what’s good. They’re used to looking at everything that’s bad.”

Seven years after its creation, the plan created by the students, which started with that town meeting, is still being used as a template to build a rich future for the people of that area. In Elliott County there is a palpable sense of pride and ownership in what’s been achieved—Sandy Hook’s newly refurbished Main Street, a wildlife preserve and handicapped-accessible hiking trail, barns displaying the work of local artists, and the three-year-old Laurel Gorge Cultural Heritage Center, which has drawn tourists from 41 states and 11 countries.

As much as the students are learning about the design and planning process, they are also trying to show the community a process they can follow once they’re gone.

Her face lights up when she remembers the moment when people suddenly began to speak up, naming places and things they were proud of and wanted to show to visitors.

Opposite, Top: The 2007 capstone class in landscape architecture is preparing a master plan for Owen County. From the left are class members Katie Hardcastle ’07, Trey Rudolph ’07, and Nick Berger ’07, with Brian Lee, assistant professor of landscape architecture.

Opposite, Bottom Right: The handicapped-accessible hiking trail in Elliott County.
Counties across the state have benefited from watershed plans completed by capstone students. Counties where master plans have been completed.

Seeing the Whole
Landscape architects do more than "shrubify and beautify," said Steve Austin '86, who majored in landscape architecture. Austin is president of Bluegrass Tomorrow, a nonprofit regional planning agency, and co-teacher of the capstone course.

"It's understanding communities from the physical to the social to the economic aspects of it, to the infrastructural aspects of sewer lines and roads, and then finally to the design of parks and downtowns and all the things in between," said Austin. "Only landscape architects look at it that holistically."

During long days and late nights from January through April, the students, who, in any given year may number from eight to 22, research historical, demographic, geological, and socio-economic data. Through visits to the communities, they become familiar with an area, its people, its culture, its potential.

"The sizeable spiral-bound, full color master land plan that results from all the research, town meetings, and brainstorming sessions helps to advance a community's future decisions concerning growth, land management, and economic issues.

"As much as the students are learning about the design and planning process, they are also trying to show the community a process that they can follow once we're gone," said Brian Lee, assistant professor of landscape architecture, who has taught the course for the past three years.

Prior to Lee, Horst Schach, chair of the Department of Landscape Architecture, held the reins of the capstone course for nearly two decades.

Schach believes the course's all-encompassing nature exemplifies what the professional landscape architect will be called to do in the future.

"My personal philosophy is that this is where our profession needs to play a more important role," he said, "because in a state like Kentucky, growth management is one of the biggest issues."

Washington County
One day a community can look around and discover that it's "suddenly on the radar screen." That was the case in Washington County, said Rick Greenwell, the county's agricultural extension agent.

The county brims with history and scenery, rolls in rich farmland, and is located within easy driving distance of Louisville and Lexington. Some Washington County residents realized that if they didn't have a plan for the future, they were in danger of losing much of their past.

The neighboring community of Bardstown and adjacent counties Mercer and Boyle had been developed, and as Greenwell said, "Now it's our time."

"Now we've been discovered by the rest of the world and change is descending upon us, and that can be good and it can be bad," he said as he drove along a nineteenth century stagecoach road.

The Washington County master land use plan, created by the 2003 landscape architecture graduating class, envisioned future development that would enrich the economy without damaging the environment or obstructing the gorgeous views. It also would preserve the county's farms.

"This plan is full of alternatives," said Greenwell. "They make sense, they look good, and they will allow us to retain our heritage."

Seven Years Later
It's been seven years since the Elliott County Heritage Plan was completed. During those years, the 2000 graduating class of landscape architects dispersed and found roles in the professional arena. But recently, some members of that class returned to Sandy Hook to view the results of their work.

As Ben Taylor '00 rode along an invigorated Main Street, he thought back on the process.

"I think we tried to look at it from every angle. Economic growth, the incoming prison and jobs, tourism as a spur of that, and also land use plans for what happened if those things came to town, how they would develop and revitalize the city."

Schach is obviously pleased with what he sees in Elliott. For him, it's one thing to see the physical results of all the work, but to see everyone in the community becoming involved means far more. "To me, that's really the bonus that goes on top of everything else," Schach said.

Dave Leachman '00 looked around the new cultural center, visibly impressed with all that had been done.

"That's why I wanted to come," he said. "I think that's why we all came, to see what had happened, what the effect was on the county. They ran with some of the ideas, and you can see this place is built, and that's exciting."

The landscape architecture capstone course is an example of how a few students and a group of passionate citizens can bring about change that resonates for years to come and benefits all corners of the Commonwealth.

"The future's in good hands. We're lucky to have people like this who want to make it a better place. It's very refreshing," said Greenwell. \n

Springfield, Kentucky in Washington County