Community Visioning - A University Student's Perspective

THE EVANGEL UNIVERSITY STUDENT TEAM
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EVANGEL UNIVERSITY • CITY of SPRINGFIELD, MISSOURI
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INTRODUCTION

According to Next Generation Consulting 2009-2010 *Next Cities* report, Springfield, Missouri, is ranked 17 in the "Mighty Micros: Next Cities" list.[1] Evangel University (EU) appreciates the opportunity to participate in the continued improvement of the city of Springfield through the Community Visioning Challenge 2010. Evangel boasts of a wide range of diversity with students from all 50 states and 11 foreign countries. This diversity of backgrounds and thinking helped us understand what our age demographic finds important in a city. Our visioning team used an extensive literature search and the "voice" of student focus groups to identify the attributes important to a college student choosing where to live after graduation. We used this list of attributes to create a survey for our undergraduate students to rate the importance of each attribute. We also asked them to identify their home community size, gender, and academic status so we could stratify the results. We received excellent feedback from 723 students which is 52 percent of Evangel's undergraduate student body. We also expanded the survey to include Evangel alumni who had chosen to live in Springfield after graduating, with a response of 33 percent of 64 alumni and included specific comments about why they chose to live in Springfield.

[1] Next Generation Consulting. (2009-2010). The 60 U.S. hotspots for young, talented workers. *Next Cities*.

In developing the survey, our visioning team grouped the attributes into benefit categories based on the literature search and focus group results. Our analysis of the importance ratings enabled us to identify the most important benefit categories to our students. This report presents those benefit categories and the importance of each of the underlying attributes. After examining the students' community size and academic status we identified significant differences.

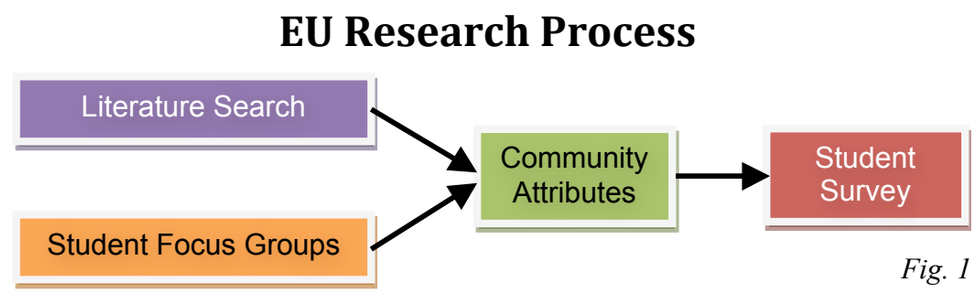

Fig. 1

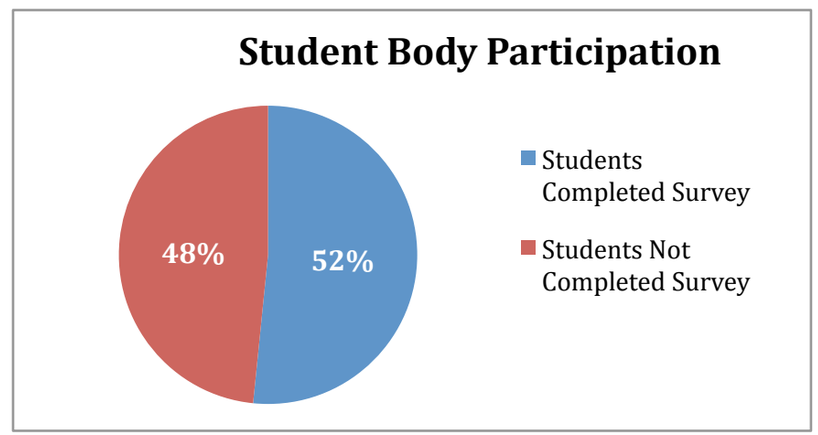

Fig. 2

BENEFIT CATEGORIES

After performing the focus groups and processing the survey results, we concluded that the benefit categories important to Evangel students and Evangel alumni still living in Springfield after graduation include *downtown*, *infrastructure*, *environment*, *economy, community life,* and *activities*. In order to meet the report length requirement, the average importance rating of each category was determined, allowing us to select the top four benefit categories to address: *downtown* (92.8 percent)*, infrastructure* (85.4 percent)*, environment* (89.2 percent)*,* and *economy* (86.1 percent). Not included in this report are *activities* (82.8 percent) and *community life* (80.5 percent).

Downtown

Results

In comparison to other categories in our survey, current Evangel students and graduates who are still living in Springfield find *downtown* to be the most important aspect they consider in a city. This category contains the different criteria of appearance, safety, activities (dining, shopping, shows, etc.), and culture. As shown in Figure 2, the two categories that were most important to current Evangel students were *safety* and *activities.* Of the students who took the survey, 97 percent viewed *safety* as an important issue, and 95 percent also claimed *activities* to be of high importance.

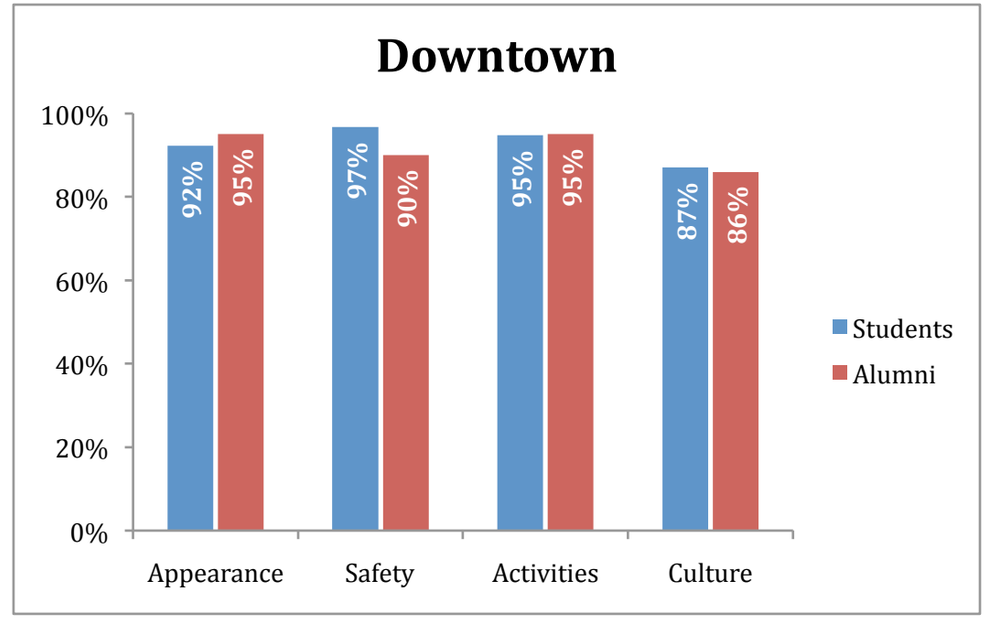

Fig. 3

Ideas

During each focus group discussion, students commented on the improvements that have been made in the downtown area within recent years. Through the addition of several parking garages and a new movie theater, the students felt these changes helped the life of downtown by bringing more people into the downtown area. Students believed the increase in lighting from the parking garages helped to enhance the overall feeling of safety while walking through the downtown area.

During our statistical analysis of the survey results, we performed an Analysis of Covariance and found the quality of downtown Springfield was more important to females (m=6.17) than males (m= 6.00). Knowing that females look at the quality of downtown may be beneficial to incorporate businesses that appeal to female interest. One female in our focus group stated, “Having more shopping, such as small boutiques or clothing stores, would encourage me to visit downtown more often. Planting flowers and trees throughout would also improve downtown’s aesthetics.” One view that the students strongly held is that the downtown area should look nice and clean. Maintaining the appearance of downtown, and restoring historic buildings will make downtown more attractive.

Students believed further restoration of downtown could be made by renovating old buildings and run-down businesses. “Take the old and make it new by bringing them into the twenty-first century,” one student said. New lofts being opened in downtown Springfield will be a great addition to the city. People living in a downtown setting want to have accessibility to shop for anything they may need (groceries, clothing, food, etc.) within a few short blocks of where they live. Students also believed downtown needs to have a variety of activities going on every weekend.

“Downtown shuts down at nine p. m., except for the bars, movies and coffee houses. There needs to be more activities going on downtown to make it livelier,” stated a student during the focus group. An Evangel graduated noted, “The Art Walk adds more culture into downtown in one night than there is the rest of the month.”

Fig. 3

Infrastructure

Results

Evangel students found infrastructure to be essential. The category of infrastructure contains: mass transit (bus or subway system), prompt completion of road projects, drive time (traffic, congestion, and traffic lights), response time to disruptions (electrical failure, major storms), public education system (progressive, manageable class size, positive results), libraries/universities, quality health care services and facilities, and safety (police and fire protection system, low crime rates). The analysis of covariance revealed infrastructure to be of less importance (m = 5.74) to seniors than the remaining three younger classes (average of m = 5.92). Overall, the student body identified two benefits within *infrastructure* that were of importance: *safety* and *quality health care services and facilities*. Both segments were rated by 95 percent of students completing the survey as important or higher.

Ideas

Springfield has begun to make improvements with the renovation of the Springfield-Branson Regional Airport, which was brought up within several focus groups addressing that the increased number of flights has made travelling to and from home much easier. The *New York Times* article, "Cities Compete in Hipness Battle to Attract Young," states one great aspect of Atlanta, is "an airport hub that allowed easy travel."[2] We would like to commend Springfield on the progress, but there is always room for development. For example, in order to make a first-class impact on visitors, the travel routes to and from the airport and the surrounding area should create welcoming environment. An increase in the number of flights and reasonable airfare are two areas that future graduates would like to see.

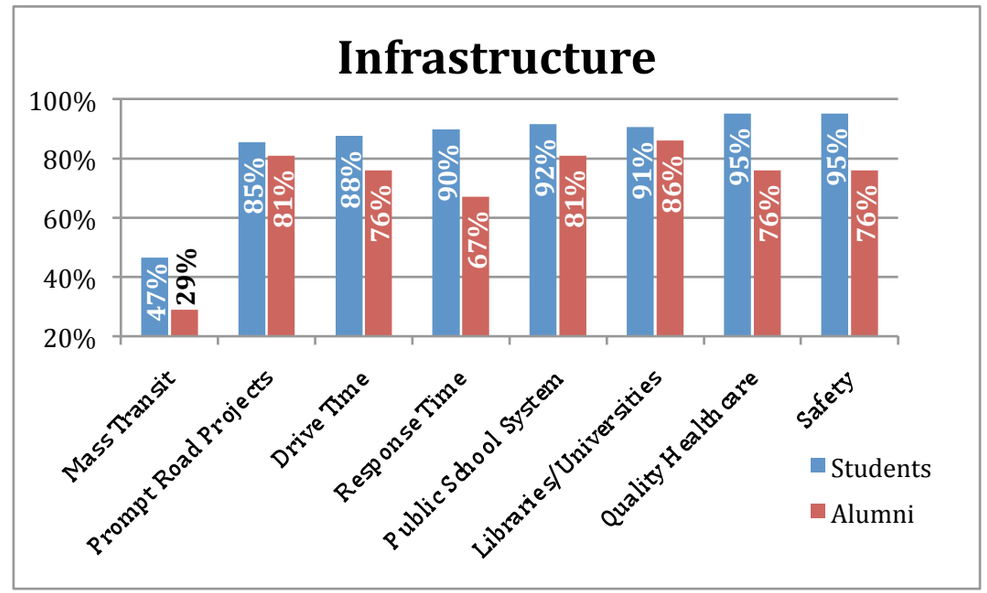

Fig. 5

[2] Dewan, S. (2006 November 25). Cities compete in hipness battle to attract young. *The New York Times*, Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/25/us/25young.html

We found that within the Evangel student body, most knew of St. John's and Cox Medical Centers as healthcare providers, but were unaware of smaller practices (family doctors) within the City. One female student expressed her concern about the accessibility of the hospitals, "Being pregnant, I don't want to be stuck on the other side of town and not make it there in time." Springfield's growing population of young families in Springfield, offering parenting classes will improve knowledge in early childhood development, affecting the child's performance, attitude, and personality for a lifetime. The parents will also benefit from the support groups created within the classes, as they will be able to create friendships with others in the class.

Environment

Results

Both current Evangel students and Evangel alumni living in Springfield viewed environment as important. The environment category contains the following criteria: beautification (parks, landscaping), continuous improvement and development, architecture (interesting building design), cleanliness of city, and low pollution (clean air, water, etc.). Evangel students found *continuous improvement and development* and *cleanliness of the city* as highly important. Of the students who found environment central to the city in which they desired to live, 99 percent of them found *continuous improvement and development* to be of high significance, which would include projects such as the $16 million wastewater project for the Southwest Waste Water Treatment Plant.[3] The *cleanliness* criteria proved to be significant to 97 percent of the students. Ninety-five percent of the Evangel alumni who had taken the survey stated that *beautification* and *cleanliness* were essential to a city's environment.

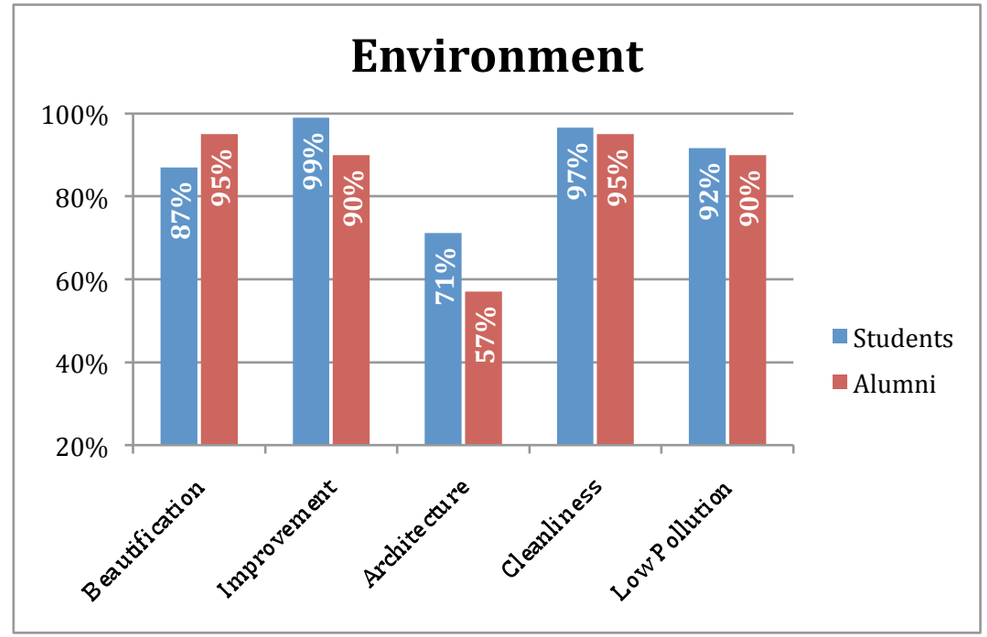

Fig. 6

[3] Lancaster, Kris (2010 February 12). Federal, State and Local Officials to Break Ground on $16M in Improvements to Springfield, Mo., Wastewater Treatment Facility. *Environmental Protection Agency*. http://yosemite.epa.gov/opa/admpress.nsf/names/r07_2010-2-12_wastewater_treatment_springfield_mo.

Ideas

In our research we have found that young people often choose a place to live first, and then they find a job.[4] The choice of where they live is often dependent on weekend visits.[5] Students take these visits while growing up, to see what appeals to them and where they might want to live one day.[6] One issue that has not been strongly promoted in Springfield is recycling. If the city can better promote and create ease when recycling it will decrease pollution. Many of the students who come to Evangel have come from cities where recycling was highly regarded, and were surprised to find just how difficult it is to recycle in Springfield.

The ability to beautify the city through planting, creation of green spaces, and maintaining parks can be achieved by encouraging students to participate and promoting community involvement. Also, by conveying to business owners the benefits of increased beauty, cleanliness, and safety in the city by giving their buildings a 'facelift,' which is a way to refresh the look of the business (fresh coat of paint, clean windows, etc.), the city can increase the beautification factor of the city and therefore increase the appeal to young, educated adults.

[4] Dewan, S. (2006 November 25). Cities compete in hipness battle to attract young. *The New York Times*, Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/25/us/25young.html

[5] Lee, A. (2009 April 08). City given advice to attract young adults. *Daily Telegram*, Retrieved from http://www.lenconnect.com/news/x1098991789/City-given-advice-to-attract-young-adults

[6] The Segmentation Company. (2006 May 08). Attracting college-educated, young adults to cities. *CEOs for Cities*.

In our focus groups, the students brought up the thought of having community days to beautify the city. They believe this well help create a sense of ownership in Springfield and allowing the community to be proud of their neighborhood. One issue the students feel strongly about is the difference between the north and south side of Springfield. Many see the north side as being run down and dirty; however the south side is viewed as modern and clean. Students have noticed improvements made by the City on Commercial Street the last few years, but still believe that more can be done to improve the north side of Springfield.

Economy

Results

Both Evangel students and Evangel alumni living in Springfield found economy to play a vital role in choosing where to live. The economy category contains the following criteria: job opportunities/stability, cost of living (housing, food, fuel, etc.), entrepreneur friendly (promote start-up and growth of new business), city growth, quality and range of housing (style of apartments, rentals, and price range), low poverty rate, and reasonable taxes (property, sales, etc.). Ninety-eight percent of Evangel students found *job opportunities/stability* to be highly important, while 97 percent deemed *cost of living* to be an influential factor in their city of choice. Apparently this opinion was shared by the Evangel alumni, as their responses showed 100 percent agreement on the importance of these factors.

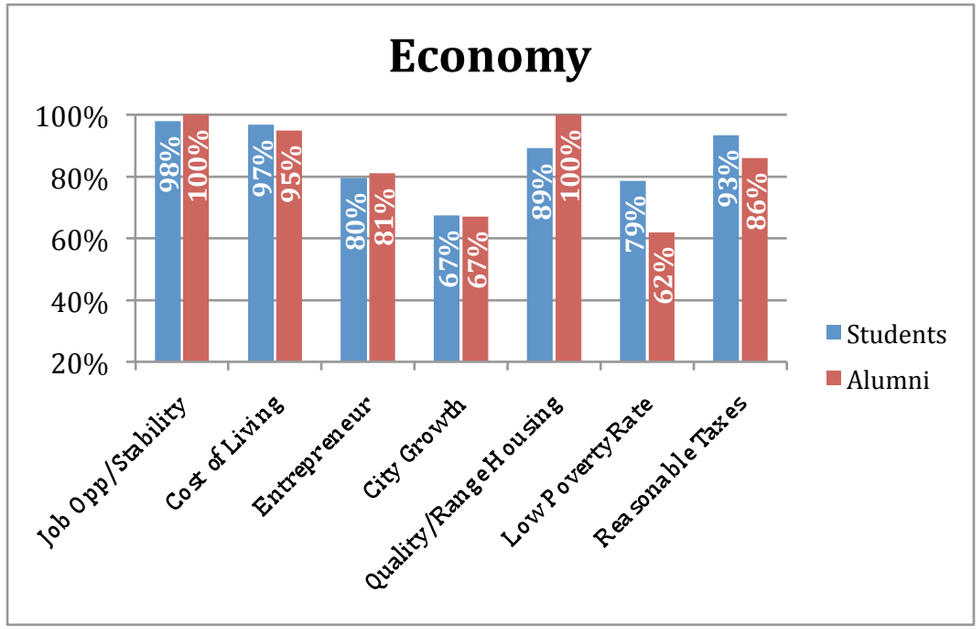

Fig. 7

Ideas

Springfield has been recognized for its low cost of living including utilities, gas prices, and affordable housing. Current students and alumni, enjoy Springfield's low cost of living. A current Evangel student commented on how cheap necessity items are within the city. "Groceries, like a gallon of milk are well below the national average, along with gas prices." Affordable housing was also a factor for students when determining where they planned to reside. Students from other parts of the country noted they can rent larger apartments in Springfield for less than most other cities such as Kansas City, Houston, or Chicago. Making sure housing is affordable to those wishing to live in Springfield will be important for growing Springfield's economy.

When it comes to job opportunities and job stability Springfield has continued to take great strides even in this economic downturn. According to an article in the Springfield News Leader titled, "Area stands alone in net job growth," Springfield's metro area gained six hundred jobs in February. As the state unemployment rate remains unchanged, Springfield manufacturers rehired laid-off workers and job listing increased from four hundred to seven hundred fifty in just two months.[7]

Increasing awareness within Springfield of local job availability may prompt students to seek job opportunities in Springfield. Through an Analysis of Covariance, we found the Springfield economy was most important to sophomore and junior males (m=6.10 and m=6.13 respectively). Local businesses could target sophomore and junior males by providing job shadowing opportunities during those college years as a way to show them what is available. Students would be provided with needed experience and would have a chance to build their network, making connections with possible future employers within the City. Students who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to recommend the city

[7] Tang, D. (2010 March 21). *Area stands alone in net job growth*. Springfield News Leader. Springfield, Missouri.

as a place to work.[8] Businesses that are looking to hire could also be encouraged to post their job openings on local job search engines, allowing students and residents to be informed of job opportunities within the Springfield area. Students want to be ensured the area has a competitive job market along with competitive wages. This will keep educated graduates within the Springfield area which in turn increases the quality of the work force, benefitting the local economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the process of conducting our research and preparing this report, our team identified some opportunities for creating a great city that extends beyond the primary scope of the Visioning Challenge. It is one thing to create a vision. It is another thing to implement it successfully. We offer a best practice model and a communication concept that we believe can help propel the City of Springfield into a community of excellence.

Best Practice Model

The City of Coral Springs, Florida, provides an excellent opportunity for the leaders of Springfield to benchmark the systems that lead to excellence in leadership; strategic planning; customer focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management, workforce focus, process management, and results. In our literature research, we found and studied the 50-page summary of the City of Coral Springs' application for the Baldrige National Quality Award (BNQA). This city of approximately 132,000 residents was selected as a BNQA recipient in 2007. To be a recipient, the applicant must demonstrate best in class results achieved through the development and deployment of systematic and integrated approaches to achieve their mission and purpose.

Coral Springs has identified the following principal factors that determine success: property tax rate, bond rating, crime rate, reputation of the schools, parks infrastructure quality, community aesthetics, and accessibility of services. Strengths found in the report are:

- Organizational culture reflected in its four core values: customer focus, leadership, empowered employees, and continuous improvement.
- Strategic planning based on its priorities: customer-involved government; financial health and economic development; excellence in education; neighborhood and environmental vitality; youth development and family values; strength in diversity; and traffic, mobility and connectivity.
- Since 1999, the percentage of residents who are satisfied with city services has been in the mid- to upper 90s.
- Annually, city leaders hold neighborhood meetings known as "Slice of the Springs" and the customers' overall quality ratings are measured in six neighborhood segments.
- Business satisfaction rose from 76 percent in 2004 to 97 percent in 2008.

[8] (2007). *Coral Springs 2007 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award* (pp. 1-50). Coral Springs, FL: City of Coral Springs.

- Eighty-six percent of the schools earned an "A" grade in 2006 based on student performance on the Florida comprehensive Assessment Test in reading, math, and writing.
- From 1996 to 2006, more than 90 percent of the employees have been satisfied with their jobs and are willing to recommend the city as a place to work.

The city of Coral Springs, Florida is a planned community that was formed in 1963. Since this time the city and its residences have been inseparable. The feat of being considered *MONEY Magazine*'s top cities to live and raise kids has not been taken for granted by the citizens of the community. They have worked side-by-side with the city to constantly improve the way of life within Coral Springs. For instance, when the residents of Coral Springs wanted to improve the aesthetics of the city, the city took action by placing codes on what sign size and color can be, where trees are located, and certain parking restrictions. The citizens have willfully complied and have been pleased with the results. The communication between the city website and social networking play an intricate part.

Communication

Our team has concluded that an integrated system of communication within Springfield would be indispensible for all citizens, businesses, and the government officials of our city. Coral Springs has achieved great success by utilizing their city website and social networking capabilities. During a phone interview with Susan Grant, Human Resource Manager (Coral Springs for 17 years), expressed, "Our website plays a vital role in communicating activities going on in the community. The main goal was to create a website that was clear, accessible, and navigable." Their Facebook and Twitter pages have received good feedback from the community proving the information provided by this technology is beneficial to the public.

Creating a community language and common methodologies that connect people engaged in government, business, education, and community services, would be equally beneficial. As an example, the City of Branson, Missouri, has provided training on the principles from the 7 *Habits of Highly Effective People* and *Servant Leadership* to all leaders within their community. We suggest that a simple start would be to promote a community language and practices for:

- Conflict resolution (common methodology for resolving differences that cause disruption)
- Problem solving skills (common methodology for finding the root cause of problems and selecting the best solution)
- Decision making skills (common methodology for identifying key decision factors and using them to consider potential solutions)

- Team meeting skills (common language and approaches for charting improvement teams, creating agendas, developing team ground rules, and defining team roles)
- Idea generating and consensus building tools (common language and techniques to generate ideas and achieve consensus on priorities)
- Communication styles (common process and language to identify communication/social styles and to learn how to more effectively communicate with other styles)

The skills themselves would lead to continuous improvement within organizations of all types throughout the community. They would attract and engage younger people to be involved. People coming together from various organizations to work on a common goal would be more effective. These skills could even improve the personal lives of the residents of Springfield.

CONCLUSION

The categories of *downtown*, *infrastructure*, *environment*, and *economy* are the most important aspects of a city that will determine where students will live upon graduation. By improving these areas, the city of Springfield can become an attractive place for the younger generation to continue their lives. To implement the vision, Springfield leaders should benchmark the best practices of other communities of excellence such as Coral Springs, Florida. The City of Springfield can more effectively engage continuous improvement by promoting an integrated communication system that (1) facilitates communication between City leadership and its residents and organizations and (2) help create common language and practices that enhance collaboration. This would allow for common goals to be established and pursued. Citizens want to know what is going on in their city, not just the activities, but also the changes being made, the goals being set, and the progress of these changes and goals. Through effective communication systems, the City of Springfield can connect to all of its citizens, and create a place to live where their input shapes their environment.

The fact that the City has created this competition to seek the voice of its student population expresses its desire to meet the needs of a new generation. As we progress into the stage of our lives where we settle into communities, we are looking to be engaged in ways that allow us to be connected, continuously learn, and make a difference in the lives of those around us.

METHODOLOGY

Evangel University created a Springfield Visioning Team of nine students For the Community Visioning Challenge 2010. Faculty sponsors, Mr. Bernie Dana, Associate Professor of Business, and Lt. Col. Dale Garrett, Associate Professor of Social Science, identified 20 potential leaders for the project based on knowledge, qualities, and skills that would be needed and contribute to a cohesive team. Nickolas Boeser, Brandon Cadwell, Jordan Foster, Margaret Hill, Derek Neill, Camille Reid, Stephen Robertson, Bethany Sprenkle, Kaitlyn Thompson were able to make a commitment to the project. The sponsors selected Neill, Thompson, and Sprenkle to lead the project. After being introduced to the guidelines and goals of the competition, the team met with representatives from the City Planning Department to clarify the objectives and requirements.

We identified the following essential processes and assigned team members whose interests aligned with these activities:

- Conduct a thorough literature search of publications to identify the essential attributes of cities where people preferred to live.
- Conduct formal focus groups of 5-7 students in each group with structured questions developed with the assistance of a research professor to identify what characteristics, features and amenities (attributes) were important to the student in choosing where to live.
- Solicit gift certificates and other rewards from local businesses to provide as incentives to participate in the focus groups and the student survey.
- Merge the findings of the literature search and focus groups into a valid survey that could be completed by all undergraduate students.
- Analyze the survey results and identify key differences related to the students' community size, gender, and academic status.
- Prepare a report of the findings and methodology.
- Prepare and present an oral report to the City and County Commissioners.

Thirty-six students participated in the focus groups. Students signed an informed consent form and were made aware that their answers would remain anonymous. Before the discussion began, each student filled out a piece of paper identifying the aspects that they liked about their hometown and those that they currently enjoy in Springfield. This eliminated the possibility of ‘groupthink’ and allowed for a variety of answers and ideas, which facilitated the discussion thereafter. We video recorded each twenty-minute session which allowed us critically analyze the responses and group them into key attributes. We tallied correlating responses and created six benefit categories: *environment*, *infrastructure*, *community life*, *downtown*, *economy*, and *activities*.

We compared the focus group results with the literature search to guide the development of the Springfield Visioning student survey. The format of our survey was rather simple. We listed 38 key attributes that we had identified and

provided instructions for the students to rate the importance of the category on a scale of 1-7 with 7 being very important. The attributes were grouped under six benefit category headings that could later be used in our analysis. For example, under the heading of 'Downtown' were listed the attributes of safety, appearance, and activities. We wanted the survey to be concise and useful. We created the survey to be short enough that students would thoughtfully answer each question, and we also wanted the survey to be useful in collecting data that would identify what was important to the students. We engaged the assistance of five research oriented faculty members to review the survey for content and face validity. Dr. Dennis Wubbena, professor of marketing research; Dr. Jeff Fulks, Director of Graduation and Professional Studies; Dr. Laura Plybon, Professor of Psychology Research; Dr. Randy Tate, Professor of Humanities and former University Assessment Coordinator; and Dr. Lew Hall, Chair of the Social Sciences Department, all reviewed the survey for content and format issues. Their feedback enabled us to fine tune the survey and have confidence in the survey results.

We also wanted the survey to be taken by as many students as possible so that we could capture the diversity of our student body. We developed several motivators to engage students. We were able to collect free drinks from Rendezvous, The Hub, and Coffee Ethic, free movie tickets from Campbell 16 Theater, and free activity passes from the Discovery Center as incentives to participate. For students more motivated by a special cause, several EU faculty members generously agreed to collectively donate $1 for every survey completed to Springfield's Habitat for Humanity. We also used word of mouth and positive peer pressure to promote participation. Evangel's President, Dr. Robert Spence. kicked off the campaign by speaking to the students in our Thursday chapel of the importance of supporting the City's strategic planning process by completing the survey. We also bombarded the campus with messages promoting the survey using sidewalk chalk, mass emails, cell phone text messages, class announcements, and mailbox mailers. We set up laptop computers outside the cafeteria where students could fill out the survey as they walked to lunch or dinner. We even created a competition among the six residence halls to see which could achieve the highest participation rate. Evangel's Information Technology Department provided student access to the survey online which enabled easy student access and compilation of the results.

We collected surveys from 723 students (52% of EU's traditional undergraduate students). We analyzed the data and create our report from the results. Analyses of Covariance (ANVOCA) were conducted to determine whether the independent variables of gender, academic status, familiarity with Springfield, and the size of the community where students originated were associated with the outcomes of *environment*, *infrastructure*, *community life*, *downtown*, *economy*, and *activities*. Due to the page limit of the report we choose to address the top four benefit categories of *downtown*, *infrastructure*, *environment*, and *economy*. The initial report was created from these correlations and our literary research and was then revised and edited by the entire team for one week prior to submission.