Impact Circle Creative Placemaking Proposal for the UM-Flint Innovative Impact Award (4/3/15)

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Impact Circle Connection

This proposal is submitted on behalf of the UM-Flint Impact Circle, an interdisciplinary collective of more than a dozen faculty, students and staff who are working to apply UM-Flint’s academic service-learning, research and other connections to make Flint a more vibrant city. The group’s most active members represent a wide range of disciplines and departments: Earth & Resource Science, Social Work, Computer Science, Theatre, the Health Careers Opportunity Program, Housing and Residential Life, and University Outreach.

The Impact Circle is working to:

- Support the campus in shifting from piecemeal community engagement activities to transformative community impacts
- Galvanize research, academic service-learning and other university connections related to the City of Flint’s new comprehensive Imagine Flint Master Plan
- Foster interdisciplinary collaboration and address complex community issues requiring interdisciplinary solutions
- Position UM-Flint as the academic partner of choice in the region

One of the geographical focus areas of the Impact Circle’s work involves strengthening connections between campus and the half-mile around it. Toward that end, the proposal builds upon existing efforts to make our campus a more attractive and welcoming destination for all people, and to enable campus visitors to enjoy community assets surrounding our campus. The project itself addresses issues we have been discussing within the Impact Circle and requires interdisciplinary collaboration.

The Project: Campus Placemaking and Wayfinding

Our project is to use principles of placemaking and wayfinding to make our campus be more lively, inviting, engaging, and interactive.

Dr. Mark Wyckoff of the MSU Land Policy Institute defines placemaking as “the process of creating quality places that people want to live, work, play and learn in” (http://www.canr.msu.edu/uploads/375/65824/4typesplacemaking_pzn_wyckoff_january2014.pdf). Placemaking has been promoted by national organizations such as the Project for Public Spaces (http://www.pps.org/) and by the State of Michigan, which has launched an educational initiative to retain talent in the state by teaching communities how to create attractive places for young professionals (http://miplace.org/). Wayfinding is the signage and other engaging visual, cognitive and sensory clues that show people where to go to access places of interest.
Specifically, we want to work collaboratively with key partners to develop and install creative wayfinding signage across campus. The signs will be part public art, part directional and interpretive signage, and part messaging about walking/biking routes connected with campus as well as the health and environmental benefits of non-motorized transportation – all reinforcing the UM-Flint brand.

Some of the wayfinding, messaging, and/or interpretive signs will be brand new to campus and others will update existing outdated signage. For example, signs on our campus along the Flint River Trail point passersby to the former Flint Farmers’ Market site, and students have been calling the outdated map in front of French Hall, near Harrison Street, “an eyesore” and “confusing”.

We are interested in making at least one prominent wayfinding sign digital and interactive so that people can learn about both campus destinations and Flint destinations and neighborhoods beyond the campus. Public art in the form of informational signage and marketing pieces for locations within the ½ mile of campus will reflect the diversity of the community and will be a way to make the campus more welcoming. The project will help to weave the campus and community together by acknowledging the variety of campus/community people, experiences, and histories.

The signage will also help to increase the community’s awareness of and accessibility to University programs open to the public. For example, the entrance to French Hall is rather nondescript and does not stand out as a vibrant gateway to UM-Flint’s stellar theatre performances, which offer affordable and rich cultural experiences for performance attendees. Promoting the presence of the UM-Flint Theatre through signage at the ground level, where walkers and bikers will see it, will serve as a stronger invitation into our campus and help to maximize community investment and participation in University offerings.

The look, content and materials of the signs will be determined by a collaboration, facilitated by the Future Urban and Environmental Leaders (FUEL) student organization with oversight and guidance from Dr. Victoria Morckel and Mona Munroe-Younis. Impact Circle and FUEL members look forward to working collaboratively with on-campus groups such as the UM-Flint Walk & Bike Work Group, Facilities Management, and the City of Flint Planning office as appropriate. We intend to leverage these relationships that will be developed through the wayfinding project to explore additional, related placemaking projects on campus, such as for Wilson Park as an underutilized space on our campus next to the bustling Flint Farmers Market.

Other local universities have already stepped up and enhanced their campuses and surrounding communities through placemaking and wayfinding. For example, Kettering University purchased and reinvented vacant properties surrounding its campus and the MSU Flint Area Medical Education Program repainted the community mural on the side of its building in downtown Flint with the addition of its logo. Our project will demonstrate that UM-Flint is an academic partner of choice in the Flint region as well.

**Strategic Alignment**

As a creative solution, our project is strategically aligned to meet needs discussed in the UM-Flint Campus Master Plan, the UM-Flint 2011-2016 Strategic Plan and the Imagine Flint Master Plan in addition to fitting the goals of the UM-Flint Impact Circle.
The UM-Flint Campus Master Plan Update of 2011 explicitly promotes community engagement and integration. It states:

“The continued reuse of existing downtown buildings, when appropriate, and the desired transition of the City of Flint into a ‘College Town’ represent two ways in which the University can support community objectives. The Master Plan Update makes an effort to integrate the pedestrian network of the City and Flint River Trail system with University pathways.” (p. 9, https://www.umflint.edu/sites/default/files/imported/chancellor/Speeches/Campus_Master_Plan_-2011-FINAL.pdf)

The Campus Master Plan Update goes on to discuss the importance of improved outdoor pedestrian and bicycle circulation, connections and gateways, which will guide our efforts.

The project contributes to UM-Flint’s achievement of the UM-Flint 2011-2016 Strategic Plan (http://www.umflint.edu/sites/default/files/imported/chancellor/Documents/StratPlan2011-2016.pdf), including top priorities and initiatives identified through the November 2014 campus town halls and online feedback portal facilitated by the Chancellor. These strategic plan priorities and initiatives are:

- (Top Priority) Enhance the quality and breadth of academic programs, and be a school of first choice.
- (Top Priority) Foster a culture in which faculty are supported in pursuing disciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching, scholarship, and creative activity.
  - (Top Initiative) Interdisciplinary Learning, Teaching, Research, and Development
- (Top Priority) Fulfill our student-centered mission as we serve a growing and increasingly diverse student population.
  - (Top Initiative) Systematically connect student with every aspect of institution to foster academic, social, career, and personal development as well as experiential learning.
- (Priority) Expand participation in civic engagement, experiential learning, and service learning.
  - (Initiative) Be a catalyst for a great college town.
  - (Initiative) Seek opportunities to advance urban redevelopment goals in the City of Flint.

The City of Flint’s Imagine Flint Master Plan, adopted in 2013, is a visionary blueprint for Flint’s future planning and development (http://www.imagineflint.com/Documents.aspx). Given the abundance of both assets and needs in the community, the Master Plan calls for partnership in nearly all areas of city improvement, offering a seemingly limitless number of opportunities for academic service-learning, research, and civic engagement for our campus. The Master Plan especially calls on anchor institutions, such as UM-Flint, to take an active role in investing in their surrounding ½ mile radius. U3 Ventures from Philadelphia is currently working in Flint to develop an “Eds and Meds” anchor strategy, engaging top leadership at UM-Flint, Hurley, McLaren, Genesys, MSU and other higher education institutions. The three key objectives for the anchor strategy are on living local, buying local and maximizing opportunities. Continuing to invest in the area immediately surrounding campus and branching into nearby neighborhoods where UM-Flint is well connected will continue to uplift areas where many of our students, faculty, and staff live and spend time in Flint. Creative, artsy wayfinding and healthy messaging will add interest to the campus and the community. The project will soften the line between campus and community to enhance one’s feeling of being in a vibrant college town, as Wayne State University has done successfully (see http://media.wayne.edu/2015/03/23/walk-wayne-state-encourages-walking-biking-exploring). The project also directly addresses community development strategies outlined in the Imagine Flint Master Plan, including:
• (Environmental Features, Open Space & Parks) Work toward reducing Flint’s carbon footprint by promoting transit use, bicycling, clean energy, and cleaner industry.
• (Transportation & Mobility) Increase public awareness of the health benefits of walking.
• (Transportation & Mobility) Promote walking as a pro-active way to reduce vehicle emissions.
• (Arts & Culture) Ensure cultural events are appealing and accessible to, and inclusive of all Flint residents, particularly youth.
• (Arts & Culture) Improve wayfinding signage to create stronger access between the community cultural institutions.

The Impact

Our project represents both an innovative, creative process and product for our campus.

Through the project, the Impact Circle seeks to raise campus awareness about a novel approach that faculty, staff, and students can take to simultaneously enhance academic learning and create wider community impacts through sustained projects and partnerships. The process-related innovations are:

• **How to organize a project that is rooted in student learning yet breaks beyond the timeline of the class in order to achieve more significant outcomes than can be accomplished in a 14-week semester.** The Impact Circle’s idea for pursuing placemaking came from its partnership with the City of Flint, and its own evaluation of important campus connections with the Imagine Flint Master Plan. As a result, Dr. Morckel built four applied service-learning projects into her Winter 2015 Urban and Regional Land Use Planning (RPL 311) course, including one that has engaged 7 students in articulating the strategic alignment of the Impact Circle’s work with campus priorities and developing recommendations to improve UM-Flint campus placemaking to make our campus more accessible and friendly. In order to carry forward the recommendations of students in the class, the student club FUEL (Future Urban & Environmental Leaders, http://www.umflint.edu/ers/future-urban-environmental-leaders) will take on the next step of working collaboratively with others on campus to develop and implement the wayfinding project.

• **How to shift from piecemeal civic engagement activities (e.g. one-time service-learning projects that are disconnected from implementation efforts) to generating more transformational community impacts.** By building relationships between larger campus efforts, a campus committee, a class, a student organization, and other stakeholders we are able to achieve a project that will create significant, positive impact on the appearance and energy on campus. We will demonstrate the importance of using an interdisciplinary approach that involves faculty, students, and possibly coursework from a range of departments.

• **How to use the Impact Circle’s approach to partnership-building that provides consistency in involvement of faculty and staff over time, with flexibility in the participation of students.** This method of partnership allows faculty and staff to maintain a long-term line of sight with UM-Flint civic engagement goals that dovetail with City of Flint redevelopment goals while students and the “bite-size” projects they work on toward those goals will naturally change over time. This approach can position UM-Flint to create the kind of interdisciplinary, transformational community change that Syracuse University achieved in revitalizing the SALT District of the New
Westside through hundreds of student projects impacting green development, education, public health, parks and recreation, the arts, and overall quality of life (http://www.saltdistrict.com/).

In order to share these innovations with campus, we will work with UREL to share the story of our process with campus.

The product, the wayfinding public art itself, is a creative addition to our campus and placemaking is a new concept on our campus in the sense that UM-Flint has yet to truly embrace it. The product-related innovations are:

- **A new approach for problem solving by moving our campus in the direction of strategic placemaking.** Through the wayfinding project, we will raise awareness about placemaking on our campus. Once the importance of placemaking is elevated, there will be greater energy and support for carrying out placemaking projects called for in the Campus Master Plan. These changes, including making outdoor walkways and gateways to campus more identifiable, attractive, and welcoming, will enhance the climate of the university, as students will want to stay on our campus longer than the time it takes to be in class. The project will create efficiencies by addressing the long-discussed campus challenge of confusing navigation of campus, especially for new students and employees, and visiting families. Creating beautiful and inviting campus grounds also will enhance the quality of the environment for faculty and staff, and support their participation in the M-Healthy campaign by encouraging walking and biking on breaks and to surrounding amenities.

- **Building art and creativity into the physical presence of our campus.** The public art/signage will enliven campus and help to create campus efficiency by attracting prospective students. First impressions are lasting, and the project will showing prospective students and their families how UM-Flint and the surrounding community offers a full College Town experience connected to downtown eateries, the Flint Cultural Center, Flint Farmers Market and other amenities in walking/biking distance. The product of our work will allow for more interesting and vibrant images of our campus for promotional brochures and videos.

In order to make this project successful and have broad-reaching impacts for our campus, the project requires the full $10,000 award. Whenever possible, the award will be leveraged to seek additional funding, such as competitive placemaking grants through the national Project for Public Spaces, National Endowment for the Arts, and ArtPlace America.

“We want to be a campus of first choice, and maybe it’s not really obvious, but placemaking is a way to make that happen. When I thought about going to college, I thought about my entire college experience and the kind of community I would be in. You know, I thought about being in a college town. That’s a thing that students pay attention to when they’re choosing a university. With wayfinding, we are not only connecting the community to our campus, we are connecting students to the community. Students want to walk around, they want to go to local businesses. Being in a college town is important to a lot of students. We can create a school of first choice by changing the way our campus interacts with other parts of the city.” ~ **Gabrielle Veal, President of FUEL student organization and Student in RPL 311**

"The placemaking proposal seems like it would enliven our community! With vibrant colors showcasing our school spirit, flags flying in the skyline and signs highlighting the attractions of our school and
community, this seems like a major improvement. Could you imagine a blue flag with a maize block-M in the middle, sunsetting in the background over the skyline of Flint? With the campus buzzing, the students will spread that enthusiasm by connecting with the city itself." ~ Joe Fallis, Student in RPL 311