

***VOICES at OHIO UNIVERSITY  
SPEAK about APPALACHIA***

***Report One:  
Interest in Appalachian Studies***

**Survey Conducted by the Appalachian Faculty  
Learning Community, Spring 2004**

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## Interest in Appalachian Studies

The Faculty Learning Community conducted this survey in order to ascertain the interest held by Ohio University about Appalachia and its people. Many universities situated in other Appalachian regions have major and minor programs in Appalachian studies (e.g., Appalachian State University, Clinch Valley College, East Tennessee State University, Marshall University, University of Kentucky, Virginia Tech, etc.). A number of these programs were developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. While Ohio University was settled in 1804, its ties seem to have been more with its eastern rather than Appalachian neighbors. Our intent was to learn specifically from faculty, students, administrative staff, and others as to their specific interests in developing an academic program focused on Appalachia here at Ohio University (OU).

A total of 71 out of the 491 respondents indicated that they might have some interest in joining a faculty study group about Appalachia. Several respondents indicated interests in a variety of suggested activities associated with Appalachia (Table 1). In most cases, 25% of the respondents indicated interest in activities related to Appalachia. However, many participants said they would appreciate further information about activities related to Appalachia. Many expressed interest in participating in a community or university project related to a timely issue. A total of 50% of the survey participants said that they might be interested in attending a retreat about Appalachia.

**Table 1**  
**Reported Areas of Interest for Future Participation**

AREA OF INTEREST	% OF INTERESTED STUDY RESPONDENTS
Take part in a community/university project related to an issue of concern in Appalachia	54%
Be kept informed about events pertaining to Appalachia happening at Ohio University	49%
Participate in field trips to regional areas of interest	43%
Take a class about Appalachia	28%
Join a faculty/community activist group related to an issue of concern about Appalachia	26%
Participate in research about Appalachia	26%
Enroll in a workshop about Appalachia	23%
Join an Appalachian book club discussion	21%

As indicated in Table 2, a strong interest among respondents (77%) in an Appalachian Studies Program exists. While some (5%) noted that they had no interest in an Appalachian Studies Program, many suggested perspectives that might be considered if such a program were to be developed. Links between Appalachian topics and links to academic areas such as history, sociology, health, health literacy, nursing, education, business, anthropology, environmental studies, geography, and linguistics were mentioned.

**Table 2**  
**Interest in Appalachian Studies Program**

<b>Participant Response</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage of Respondents</b>
Definitely Yes	184	37%
Possibly	197	40%
Definitely No	26	5%
Not Sure	61	12%
No Answer	23	5%

### **Usefulness of an Appalachian Studies Program**

Of those responding to the question (i.e., #17 in the survey) about a potential Appalachian Studies Program, several respondents raised important points for consideration. A few persons were forthright in their responses: “Excuse me for being blunt, but what is really the point of such a certificate?” Others expressed concerns that a separate program was not the answer, but instead ideas should be integrated into the university and its programs. For example, one person said, “I do not believe there is a need for such a program. This issue should be addressed in the totality of the university because we live and work and use the resources of Appalachia. I think a separate certification is NOT the way to approach this problem.” Another said, “I think issues of Appalachia need to be part of the curriculum in all colleges at Ohio University.” Several expressed concerns that such a program would probably be of little interest to those outside Appalachia and may be of little importance to students from other regions. Still others questioned the practicality of the certificate. For example, “I don't know what exactly a student could do with such a program, since there aren't many job opportunities relating to Appalachian studies.” Generally respondents expressed concerns about the relevance, marketability, and resourcefulness of such a program.

Several suggested that an Appalachian Studies Program could be useful and of interest to persons from the region and/or those planning to stay or work in the area. For example, one student said, “I don't know how interested students from areas outside of Appalachia would be in the certificate, but I think fellow students from Appalachian areas would be interested.” Another student wrote, “I would love for there to be an Appalachian Studies degree somewhere.” Many said that learning more about Appalachia could be a valuable way to obtain cultural knowledge that can be applied to the workplace. A faculty member suggested, “I feel the only way this certificate would add value to a degree is if the individual intended to seek employment in the region. I think the College of Education would agree that schools in the region could benefit from a teacher possessing a certificate such as this.” The following comment sums up a perspective of many is: “I think it would assist in a better understanding of the area they will be living in during their time with the university and discovering the reason Ohio University exists.” Many believed a program such as this might “show a much needed commitment to our region by the university” and “add to the overall educational atmosphere of Ohio University.” Because OU is the largest university in southeast Ohio, many expressed ideas such as “Appalachia is unique and worthy of study in its geography, history, sociology, politics, and environment.”

Many expressed keen interests in an Appalachian Studies Program. Numerous respondents indicated that “The program might foster pride, along with an understanding of issues and problems.” Several thought such a program would be relevant because OU is situated in Appalachia “and a certificate program could do much to connect OU students with the surrounding area.” Many thought that finding a way to encourage students to carefully explore their surroundings while studying at OU is a goal worth striving towards. This exposure offers opportunities for students to identify similarities and differences from their previous life experiences. Thus, several respondents saw the development of such a program as “a benefit to both those born and raised in the region (exposure to the history of the region and why things are the way they are), and also as a diversity perspective to those who are not from this area.” One respondent made a distressing point: “It is absurd that college-educated people can make derisive remarks about ‘..... white trash.’”

Greater appreciation of cultural differences and eliminating stereotypes were suggested as reasons for having such a program. One respondent nicely outlined these concerns: “In a time in which many scholars discuss marginalization and stereotyping, Ohio University has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion in a unique way. The Appalachian people have endured many of the problems popularly associated with people of color. An Appalachian Studies program would officially recognize the validity of studying Appalachia, and will be important in the empowerment of those who speak from the Appalachian perspective.”

Others saw the program as a link between the community and the University. Several faculty members seemed to believe that such a program could assist students to have greater respect for the context of their education and “foster more community awareness and involvement.” One respondent said, “Creating such a program would make a bold statement that Appalachia does matter.” Another faculty member suggested that a program about Appalachia offers opportunities for scholarly endeavors, “Other universities in Appalachia offer such a certificate and seem to produce good literature.”

### **Curricula for an Appalachian Studies Program**

Study participants described concerns about how the development of an Appalachian Studies Program should be approached. Several noted that Appalachian people need to be involved in the planning, thus avoiding perspectives that treat Appalachians “as subjects from an outsider's point of view.” It was suggested that such a certificate program be housed in either the University College or Arts and Sciences. Many suggested that development of a program on Appalachia could be a visionary step in terms of student education.

Outlined below is a list of ideas related to the development of an Appalachian Studies Program:

- Provide benefits for education, social work, history, environment, cultural anthropology, geology and geography of the land, health related majors, business, communication, African American studies, social sciences, and other relevant majors
- Include Appalachian music, both religious and secular
- Engage music therapy students in the practice of their profession in the area
- Focus on issues that arise as a result of poverty and how those issues can be addressed
- Collaborate with University libraries in building an Appalachian studies collection

- Involve those who plan on working in rural and/or distressed areas
- Provide meaningful opportunities for service learning and community projects
- Include sociology, politics, psychology, economics, job training, information technology, education, and Appalachian anthropology
- Create links between the college of business, the local job market and business structures
- Promote the diversity within the region, thus contributing to a decrease in the continued negative assumptions concerning Appalachia
- Identify women's roles in Appalachia
- Encourage employers in the community, especially supervisors and managers to participate; useful to those working in local communities, local government, incoming manufacturing/business, education, and enabling those working in health care fields
- Include effects of literacy and lack of education
- Offer an incentive program for those who live and work within the region to enroll.
- Include hands on activities
- Consider research opportunities in the region and ways partnerships can be formed with local businesses, communities, agencies, etc.
- Discuss Native Americans and African Americans of the area, the coal mining industry, logging, and other industries once thriving in southeast Ohio
- Include field trips to historical sites
- Describe cultural understandings of Appalachian people, what they do, why they stay here, etc.
- Include students in International Studies as Appalachia has many characteristics similar to developing countries
- Collaborate with the Voinovich Center and ILGARD
- Invite members of the community who are interested in that particular area of study, but don't have an interest in being a full time student
- Review and build the library's reference section
- Focus less on teaching about Appalachia and more about teaching in Appalachia
- Address the diversity that exists within the Appalachian region itself

### **Interests Pertaining to Appalachia**

Respondents suggested areas of concern related to the distress of the region and significant consequences. Survey participants mentioned key concerns about Appalachian Ohio such as high poverty rates, low employment opportunities, literacy levels, and problems with educational prospects afforded youth in the rural counties were repeatedly described. Strengths of the region which needed to be built upon were also noted. Although many responses pertained to Athens County and the University, many were related to concerns about problems in areas throughout Appalachian Ohio. Findings from the participants' responses resulted in a list of pertinent issues that were underscored as needing immediate attention:

### **Environmental Issues**

- Work towards creation of viable and sustainable development.
- Protect, maintain, and preserve the natural beauty of the region.
- Create a balance between economic development and retention of natural resources.

## **Community Concerns**

- Address the growing number of social concerns (e.g., violent acts occurring in the region, the lack of correctional guidance for youth, drug and alcohol use, limited local police to enforce laws).
- Focus on problems associated with lack of valuing education.
- Examine health resource shortages and health risks associated with the region.
- Address self-esteem problems and cultivate personal pride in local residents.
- Increase educational opportunities for gifted children in region's school systems.
- Solve problems associated with economic concerns, lack of health care resources, and inadequate school funding.
- Stop the flight of professional and skilled individuals out of Appalachia.
- Eradicate the issues that create chronic poverty cycles
- Create local initiatives to solve local problems.
- Use the power of information technologies to address the problems of Appalachian people where they live, work, and play.
- Strengthen relationships between the university and the community.

## **Education**

- Increase collaboration between rural schools in southeast Ohio and OU so that regional K-12 schools have opportunities to introduce professional roles and educational opportunities.
- Enhance cooperation and understanding between university students and local residents
- Develop exchanges so that youth and adults in rural communities can have a window-to-the-world experience enlarged through cultural exchanges.

## **Arts and Humanities**

- Attend to the absence of the arts and humanities in many rural regions.
- Celebrate the uniqueness of Appalachia.
- Build on the positive assets of the region.
- Build upon cherished traditions and local heritage (e.g., wood carving, knitting, crochet, pottery making, music, basket weaving, story telling, etc.).
- Construct transitional paths from traditional arts to contemporary arts.
- Identify ways to harness the untapped resources of the Appalachian region - its people and culture.
- Develop local pride in Appalachian communities.

## **COLLABORATION THROUGH EDUCATION**

One respondent said, “Understanding and educating people about Appalachia and the issues that are relevant to the Appalachian area are vital to the growth and development of this region.” Another noted, “I am a cultural anthropologist who studies a rural, underdeveloped region in northeast Japan often compared to the West Virginian part of Appalachia. I see many parallels between my Japanese field site and life here. It's interesting and informative to observe and compare the way in which each context deals with cultural identity, political marginalization, depopulation, economic underdevelopment, and other issues pertinent to life in the outback of a G7 nation.” Another respondent wrote:

From an economic standpoint, Appalachia shares a lot of traits that are typically encountered when a U.S. company develops business relationships in a foreign country. Another curious aspect is the over dependence on extractive industries and to add to this, the areas that do not have a readily available extractive industry then tends to turn to extracting people for employment in other areas. In other words, a continuing out-migration problem tends to extract the most qualified and the most talented of the work force and sends them to either a neighboring county or to one of the surrounding major metro areas.

Some participants described risks associated with life in the Appalachian region. These risks provide reason for the university to reach out to its neighbors. For instance, a student wrote:

There is a charm of the backwater towns that I haven't found anywhere else but also a lonely sadness and depressive nature of the people who exist in them. Almost everyone on my father's side of the family (the Appalachian side) has died of some form of cancer and I can't help but think it has something to do with the area. Not to mention the depression and financial needs of such areas. The suicide rate in these towns is high, and I think it is because not many see a way out. Although the cultural heritage of this area is rich and so beautiful, there is a pain and suffering that is still apparent.

A student said, “My greatest concern is that we don't treat people as needing to be rescued, but that we draw from what they have to offer.” The people in communities surrounding Athens do not want to be rescued, but they seem willing to be partners.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It appears that while some conflicting perspectives about a need for Appalachian Studies Program exist many have interests in learning more about Appalachia and its people. However, whether or not an Appalachian Studies Program is created at Ohio University does not change the fact that finding ways for the academy and the community to collaborate and learn from one another appears to be necessary and welcomed. Because OU is situated in the heart of Appalachian Ohio, it has the ability to assume leadership to address needs through its diverse internal communities. According to many respondents, it is critical that Ohio University work collaboratively with others in the region.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Identify ways to make resources for learning about Appalachia readily available
- Identify courses where learning pertaining to Appalachia and southeast Ohio can occur
- Consider development of an Appalachian Studies Program or a related minor
- Connect with community persons who can enrich understandings about the region