Introduction

Prosper PLACE Program

The PLACE Program (Place-based Landscape Analysis and Community Education) is a community education program offered to Vermont towns by the University of Vermont and Shelburne Farms. PLACE works with local organizations, schools, residents, and town leaders to provide a series of educational opportunities to community members. Staff members research a particular town’s local and cultural history and share their knowledge and skills with residents through field trips, evening presentations, teacher professional development opportunities, and printed materials. The scope, duration, and public events vary from town to town, depending upon each participating town’s goals and resources.

Since its inception in 2001, PLACE has worked with twelve communities. In 2005, the program began to experiment with an “Institute model” in which graduate students from the UVM Field Naturalist Program are hired as consultants to conduct the research and provide education programs. When a PLACE town is part of the Institute model, there is a strong service-learning component. Graduate students are trained by the PLACE director, who a UVM faculty member and landscape analysis course instructor. The town contracts with the PLACE program and in effect hires the graduate students as consultants to conduct research and provide educational programs. In other communities, the relationship between UVM and the community is not as deep; a former graduate student or the program director serves as the researcher consultant and educator.

The Prosper PLACE program began in the spring of 2006. Marsh Billings National Historical Park in Woodstock, Vermont hired graduate students from the University of Vermont Field Naturalist Program to research the landscape natural history of the four towns that comprise the Prosper Valley. Two graduate students spent the summer months perusing historical documents, interviewing local residents, and investigating the natural history of the region. They offered several educational opportunities for community members including a one day summer institute for local residents and teachers, two evening presentations for the general public, and a field trip to Dana Hill which was open to community members. Prosper PLACE also included a professional development module for teachers. Local teachers who had been through the Forest for Every Classroom (FFEC) program were offered additional training and support. As part of their graduate studies, the UVM students will complete a report that includes their research as well as a reflection on the program process and model.

Prosper PLACE is the first PLACE program to use a multi-town approach. Nestled between hills to the East and West, Prosper Valley stretches north from Barnard, and south to Woodstock, home of Marsh Billings National Historical Park. Route 12 winds its way through this picturesque agricultural valley. The region is considered a Gateway Community to Marsh Billings National Historical Park.
Evaluation Methods

PLACE staff hired PEER Associates, Inc., an external evaluation firm, to conduct the evaluation. The evaluation follows three main lines of inquiry:

• To demonstrate the impact of the Prosper PLACE program on participating teachers’ use of community resources, and to determine the most important elements of the program for teachers.
• To demonstrate in what ways (if any) Prosper PLACE impacted citizens’ understanding of and appreciation for the human and natural landscape, and the relationship between the two.
• To provide insight into whether or not the PLACE model works as a public education program for federal land management agencies and what improvements could be made to increase its value to gateway communities.

Seven teachers and close to 200 community members participated in Prosper PLACE. Because PLACE program staff was most interested in learning about the program’s impact on participating teachers, the evaluation focuses largely on teacher input. All teachers who had participated in the summer institute were asked to participate and all but one were interviewed. Four teachers who had previously participated in a fall 2006 Forest for Every Classroom (FFEC) evaluation opted to complete a written response to the interview questions. The FFEC evaluation included significant discussion about the Prosper PLACE program, and relevant data from those interviews are included in this report.

At the end of the October and November evening presentations, twenty four percent of the 180 attendees filled out a brief written survey. The surveys were long and participants were ready to leave, and were therefore spotty in the amount of feedback they provided. What they did provide, however, is useful and included in this report. On the survey, participants indicated whether or not they were willing to take part in interviews. In some cases interviewees were recommended to the evaluation team by Park staff. The interviewee pool is therefore a purposeful sample that included people who had participated in each of the various program offerings, but does not reflect the same ratio of community members who participated in the summer institute, the evening programs, and the field trip.

In summary, the Prosper PLACE evaluation consisted of the following data sources:

• Interviews with two Pomfret teachers (n=2)
• Data from FFEC Fellowship interviews with six Woodstock teachers (n=6)
• Written surveys from four Woodstock teachers (n=4)
• Review of final curricular document from Woodstock Middle School teachers
• Interviews with ten community members (n=10)
• Interviews with two Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park staff (n=2)
• Surveys from forty four community members who attended two evening presentations (n=44)
• Observations of evening programs, teacher field trip, and community member field trip

Detailed field notes were taken during interviews and analyzed for emergent themes. This informal report summarizes key findings hailing from all of these data sources.
Potential challenge factors in conducting the evaluation

Two factors were important to consider in order to mitigate bias during this evaluation process. First, one member of the evaluation team was involved as a staff member in some aspects of the program delivery, primarily administrative details preparing for the Prosper PLACE evening presentations in fall 2006. That evaluator has taken part in subsequent planning meetings for both Prosper PLACE and PLACE. Every effort was made to remain as objective as possible while interviewing participants, analyzing data, and writing the report. Moreover, her close involvement in both the program and the evaluation was indeed agreed to be an asset by her program and evaluation team mates.

Second, at the same time participants were being interviewed, Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park unveiled their publication Where our Towns Meet at a public meeting in Barnard. The book chronicles the agricultural history and current use of the Prosper Valley. Several interviewees had been involved in some phase of the book production and/or had attended the public meeting. Some people were not aware that the book and Prosper PLACE were two different projects. Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park staff notes that the two initiatives were part of their effort to create educational opportunities for the public and celebrate the community’s unique heritage. While interviewees were notified that they were not one and the same, their feedback about Prosper PLACE is likely to have been influenced by the book’s release and the dialogue that ensued during the community meeting. In areas of the report where it seemed critical to do so, the evaluator overtly discusses this relationship.

Summary of Key Evaluation Findings

- All of the teachers credited Prosper PLACE with significantly increasing the amount they incorporate the local landscape and community resources in their curriculum.

- Prosper PLACE was an extremely effective professional development opportunity for middle school teachers. It provided a process and a place to apply knowledge and skills gained through their previous participation in a Forest for Every Classroom (FFEC) training. Three elementary level teachers took part in portions of the program; two of these teachers were interviewed and had mixed feedback as to the program’s impact on their teaching practice.

- Community participants believed Prosper PLACE’s most valuable role was to bring together local residents from different backgrounds and perspectives for educational opportunities that celebrated the region’s heritage.

- Prosper PLACE was a meaningful educational opportunity. Participants loved the presenters’ enthusiasm and cited new and exciting stories they learned about the region, or new ways to look at the relationship between the cultural and natural history.

- In general, the non-teachers who were interviewed felt that Prosper PLACE did not significantly change the way they relate to the land or engage with their community.

- Park staff and community response suggests that the PLACE program can serve as a positive education program for Gateway communities.
Prosper PLACE underscored the public sentiment that the Prosper Valley is a unique place threatened by development. Respondents suggested that \textit{PLACE and/or Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Park should play a more active role in promoting increased community participation in planning and conservation oriented action.}

Participants want Prosper PLACE to continue into the future. They would like to see the program continue to offer public presentations, interactive community activities that celebrate local history, natural history walks, and field trips to historical sites. They also believe it should continue and expand its involvement with local schools.

**Evaluation Findings**

**Effective Place-based Education Professional Development**

Middle school teachers embraced the Prosper PLACE offerings and concluded that it was an excellent program for developing and delivering a place-based education curriculum. They were particularly enthusiastic about the training and support they received from the program. Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park staff agreed that Prosper PLACE was exceptional as extremely successful as a professional development model. “A lot of the emphasis in the Prosper PLACE program was connecting with the teachers,” shared one staff member. She added, “we had a great relationship with the Woodstock teachers through FFEC. We were interested in going deeper and become mentors in the community.”

A summary of the Woodstock teachers’ project, followed by an analysis of the program’s impact on their teacher practice is offered below. This is followed by a summary of the key program components they found to be most critical to the program’s success: their previous experience in FFEC, the opportunity to work together as a team, the Prosper PLACE framework, an outstanding field site, quality mentors, and financial support. Elementary school teachers from Pomfret School were also involved in Prosper PLACE. Because their participation was more limited, a summary of their activities and feedback is offered at the end of this section.

**Woodstock Middle School Prosper PLACE Project Summary**

\begin{quote}
“The PLACE program encouraged me to look at our landscape as a classroom. Having used Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park in the past, the PLACE program caused me to look elsewhere in our community for an outdoor classroom. Little did I know how rich this experience would become not only for me but for my students.”

- Woodstock Middle School Teacher
\end{quote}

Prosper PLACE was a rich foundation for developing an interdisciplinary place-based education curriculum. Prosper PLACE provided Woodstock teachers with two field trainings offered by the UVM graduate students. The graduate students used one site, Dana Hill, to model the skills needed to read a local landscape. Teachers were provided ongoing support, supplemental materials (a handbook, maps, census data, photos, etc.), and grant money to conduct the service-learning portion of the curriculum, and stipends to participate. Teachers received an additional stipend upon completion of a final report documenting their curriculum.
The teachers kicked off the school year with an interdisciplinary unit exploring their community’s history, with a focus on the settlement patterns of Dana Hill. Their efforts resulted in original student research, a field trip for all seventh graders to Dana Hill, and an ongoing enrichment class with a service-learning component. Students in the enrichment class conducted oral histories with local residents and produced a calendar that celebrates the region’s cultural history, the Prosper Valley landscape, and the interaction between the two.

During interviews and written surveys, teachers described how the program influenced their teaching practice, and then identified several key aspects of the project that were instrumental to its success.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Prosper PLACE Curriculum at Woodstock Middle School</strong></th>
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<td>The following activities are a sample of interdisciplinary, standards-based activities associated with the Prosper PLACE project</td>
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- ✓ Creation of a time capsule for area residents to open in 100 years
- ✓ Study of artifacts used by residents 100 years ago
- ✓ Reading, discussion, and reflective writings about *As Long as There are Mountains* by Natalie Kinsey-Warnock
- ✓ Tree Identification
- ✓ Tree sketching, bark rubbing, and tree scavenger hunts
- ✓ Ecosystem identification and exploration
- ✓ Use of historic census data to assess region’s agricultural past
- ✓ Preparatory research about the history of Dana Hill
- ✓ Tour of Route 12 and the Prosper Valley with focus on agricultural activities today
- ✓ Nature drawing, field investigations, and ecosystem assessment on Dana Hill
- ✓ Free writes and detailed written observations on Dana Hill
- ✓ Illustrations depicting what they thought Pingree’s farm would have looked like when the house and barn still standing and the area was in agricultural use
- ✓ Visits with professional researchers
- ✓ Group creation of a mural of the ecosystems on Dana Hill

**Change in Teacher Practice**

All of the teachers credited Prosper PLACE with influencing the degree to which they used the local landscape and community resources in their community. Prosper PLACE became the foundation from which teachers tapped new or sought out familiar resources to use in different and unique ways. Commented one teacher, “The program was the impetus to cause me to look within my community for the resources I would need to achieve my teaching goals.”

*Specific community resources teachers used in new and different ways included:*

- First and foremost, teachers used Dana Hill, an abandoned hill farm along the Appalachian Trail. This site was new to teachers, and new to their students. The crumbling stone walls and apple orchard became a central focus of student research and classroom activities.

- As part of their School Outreach Programs, Billings Farm and Museum staff came to the school for in-class visits with the students, and taught them about artifacts that were used by early
settlers and farmers. Staff also provided the teachers with background information useful to student research.

- Students helped out at the Annual Chicken Pie Supper, a fundraising event hosted by the Prosper Community Homemaker Club. Monies raised are used to renovate the Prosper Community House, a historically significant community building.

- The Woodstock Historical Society Library provided resources and information to the school.

- Teachers met a local forester during the summer field trips. He provided additional background information for curricular development. Local foresters and other landscape professionals were considered by teachers “vital” for conveying to the students the “nature of hard research”.

- Teachers attended evening presentations and field trips that originated at the Prosper Community House. They researched the history of the building, and brought the students to the site during the fall field trip.

- The Two Rivers Planning Commission provided maps that teachers found useful for studying the local landscape.

- Students participated in the Vermont Humanities Council’s Community Reads program. The book, As Long as There are Mountains, by Natalie Kinsey-Warnock, helped them to better understand what life on an old hill farm was like for young people.

- The program brought community members and teachers together during the summer institute and evening workshops, throughout the service-learning project, and as part of the ‘core team’ (a team of volunteers and community members who helped with program logistics). Getting these intergenerational groups together encouraged positive dynamics between populations that don’t frequently interact.

- Students interviewed local community members to gather stories. Those stories and photos were included in a calendar they made for community members.

- Teachers used original documents to support their curriculum and create maps, including the Beer’s Atlas, Agricultural Census Data, and the Vermont Gazetteers.

The program not only influenced teachers professionally, it influenced them personally. One teacher who was new to the region, indicated that the program helped her to get to know the area more quickly. She shared, “Since this was my first year teaching in Woodstock, it was very helpful to get out and explore the local landscape; it was an excellent opportunity to learn about the cultural and natural history of this ‘new to me’ place.”
Teachers found the following six elements of their experience with Prosper PLACE to be the most important for successful curricular development.

**Previous Place-based Education Trainings**

All of the Woodstock teachers who participated in Prosper PLACE had taken FFEC, an intensive, year-long professional development program. The FFEC training gave them a solid foundation in place-based education, a framework to think at a landscape level, and the know-how for sleuthing in their community for resources that can be used in their curriculum. Prosper PLACE provided them with a specific locale and framework to apply their skills. They felt that Prosper PLACE “strengthened” and “added depth” to the unit they developed in FFEC. One teacher summarized the groups’ thoughts by offering, “A great deal of my learning through the FFEC program was applied to the lessons written for the Prosper PLACE unit. Reading the landscape of a hillside farm was the focus of my new lessons.”

**Teamwork**

Teachers came to Prosper PLACE as a tightly knit group committed to teamwork. Marsh Billings National Historical Park commented that in addition to the teachers’ FFEC training, their camaraderie was one reason the teachers could so quickly take advantage of the program’s offerings and design an interdisciplinary project.

During meetings and field visits, the evaluator observed how much they enjoyed being outdoors with their colleagues. All of the teachers noted that teamwork was important, and two said that working with their colleagues was one of the three most critical elements to the program’s success. One teacher explained, “The Dana Hill project was helpful and centered our team. We focused on a common vision. It brought us together.” Another added, “The emphasis, from the very beginning, on team - meaning for us, interdisciplinary involvement – was critical to our commitment to endorse the best practices of middle school education. As a team we were always looking for ways to connect learning in and out of our classrooms. Prosper PLACE gave us such a rich opportunity to do that!”

**Program Framework**

Prosper PLACE came to the teachers with the seed of an idea and workshops that provided enough content and context to support a curriculum. For these experienced place-based educators, the combination of workshops, ongoing support and resources, and financial support contributed to the program’s success. The framework allowed the teachers to focus on their curriculum, and dig into a site immediately. They did not need background training in place-based education, and did not have to spend valuable time deciding where to go or what to focus on. One teacher, who loved the project, stated frankly, “Prosper PLACE came with a plan. I’m not sure if it came out as they envisioned, but it was an opportunity to teach in a fresh way. My participation will only happen again if I am invited to participate.”
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The timing and duration of the trainings, held as one or two day events throughout the summer at the nearby site, gave the teachers ample time to learn about the site, think about the relationship between the landscape and human history, gather resources, and prepare their curriculum. Teachers appreciated having the trainings spread over a few months as opposed to a week-long institute.

**Dana Hill: The “Model” Site**

“Dana Hill was the perfect place to study because it tied together many of the concepts that we were focusing on across all disciplines.”

- Woodstock Middle School Teacher

The Prosper PLACE trainings on nearby Dana Hill gave teachers a nearby site where they could implement their skills and solidify their knowledge. The teachers indicated that site was particularly well suited for original research and field visits because the site:

- was easily accessible on foot and by car;
- had numerous physical attributes that were easily discernable clues to landscape history (e.g., stone walls, abandoned spring, apple and pear orchard, farmyard, sugarhouse, etc.);
- had a good ‘story’ that wound its way through natural and cultural history and the interaction between the two;
- was the subject of a significant number of existing, original documents and artifacts that helped the teachers and students trace back several hundred years through maps, photos, and community member stories;
- was on the Appalachian Trail, which provided additional intrigue and was a good starting point for discussing land management and conservation; and
- lent itself perfectly to an interdisciplinary focus that “incorporated science, history, and global studies,” an asset in which teachers expressed particular interest.

One teacher explained that exploring one site in depth helped him gain confidence while taking the concepts of place-based education he had applied in previous trainings and applying them to a site. He stated, “Hypotheticals are very difficult to incorporate. We need to talk about local examples.” Dana Hill became a place for teachers to hone their place-based education skills and fully embrace this pedagogical approach.

**Knowledgeable and Supportive Mentors**

“The researchers did a lot of the leg work that made it possible for us to put together such a successful field study in a short period of time.”

- Woodstock Middle School Teacher

The two UVM student researchers became knowledgeable mentors to the teachers. One of their most important roles for the researchers was doing much of the site specific research that the teachers used in the planning their curriculum. Equally important, they supported the teachers throughout the process. The trainings they offered provided a place and a process for teachers to develop their knowledge and skills in landscape analysis. These “expert mentors” were available for questions as teachers thought through the natural and historical details of the site. They also provided supporting resources such as photos, census data, maps, and suggestions about people to talk to for more information.
Teachers were enthusiastic about researching the landscape with the UVM students. They found it “inspirational” to work with such “enthusiastic” students. By discovering a new place with people who were also new to the area, and who were relatively new to this approach to looking at the landscape, the teachers felt more comfortable considering themselves as “part of the research team”. They indicated they may have felt more intimidated if the researchers had been more seasoned experts.

The graduate student-researcher approach gave the program reciprocity. The graduate students helped teachers plan the field trip with their students, and participated as leaders for the students’ field trip to Dana Hill. The teachers, who were more experienced at teaching but less experienced at landscape analysis, became both mentors and students to the graduate students. The seventh grade students had a chance to meet the graduate students, younger professionals engaged in academics and conducting exciting research. The graduate students, by participating in a service-learning program offered by the University, in turn, became role models for the students.

While most teachers were excited to work with graduate students, a few teachers questioned whether it would have been more valuable if local experts had provided the majority of the research, support, and trainings. One Pomfret teacher believed that having local experts would have been better for her and her students. She felt that it would have taken far less time for local experts to familiarize themselves with the community, the land, and the resources. Local experts would be resources teachers could continue to access in the future, whereas the graduate students are transient.

Financial Support
Financial support to teachers made their curriculum possible. Grant money enabled the teachers to initiate a service learning project with their students. Creating calendars that celebrated the region’s history was an idea that one teacher believed would have been “too grand for our budget” without the support of Prosper PLACE.

The $1000 stipends they each received made the teachers “feel valued” and inspired them to make the most of the program. Even though they believe in place-based education, they admitted that it is additional work and asserted that they would not have participated as fully – or possibly not at all - without the stipend.

Elementary School Teacher Participation
Two teachers from Pomfret Elementary School considered themselves less involved with the Prosper PLACE program. One teacher who participated in all of the program offerings was personally and professionally enriched by her participation. She felt the two most important elements of the program were meeting (and re-meeting) people, and gathering ideas for her students. She took the initiative to go on additional hikes exploring local cellar holes with people she met.
during the field trips, went on a hike with the local forester and plans to invite him to her classroom. She also volunteered as a chaperone with the Woodstock Middle School Dana Hill field trip.

She also credits Prosper PLACE with providing her with additional resources that she will use as she develops this year’s Graduation Hike. The hike, a rite of passage for students entering junior high school, takes students on a day long hike over public lands from the elementary school in Pomfret to the junior high school in Woodstock. She says that while she found the presentations interesting, Prosper PLACE focused too heavily on Dana Hill, contained inaccurate information, and would have been improved had a local expert been the lead researcher.

One elementary teacher who participated in just the Summer Institute appreciated the content for her personal learning, but felt that the program had no impact on her teaching, primarily because she felt the content was at too high of a level to be applicable to her grade level. She wanted more examples of how to apply this to her grade level. She had also gone through the FFEC program.

Teacher Recommendations for Improvement and Program Future
Teachers were exceedingly pleased with all aspects of the program and plan to continue doing PLACE-like activities in the future. They requested similar types of support in the future, and had only a few minor suggestions for program improvement or ideas for augmenting the program in the future:

- Provide additional names of people and organizations that would be good resources for curricular development.
- Continue to offer suggested program sites and that can be used for research and field trips.
- Provide more opportunities to meet with the people who researched and prepared the booklet Where our Towns Meet. Teachers were confused why the resource was not brought to their attention earlier but are excited to tap that resource in the future.
- Provide teachers with copies of Where our Towns Meet.
- Make the Where our Towns Meet book accessible in smaller sections. Create PDFs of the document that teachers can then use directly with their students
- Provide trainings on how to use maps and how to incorporate map making into their curriculum.
- Support future projects with applicable trainings, mentors, money, and supporting documents.
- Suggest activities and learning opportunities that can be used for inquiry based learning opportunities
- Suggest activities that teachers at younger grade levels can use to create appropriate place-based education curricula.
- Continued funding the program.
- Continue connecting the schools with community members.
- Continue using graduate students for research and mentoring.
Woodstock teachers are considering using King Farm as a resource in the future and would benefit from the support of the PLACE program and/or Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park. Pomfret teachers plan to again offer the Graduation Hike and include content they learned in Prosper PLACE. Pomfret teachers are also seeking money to fund a summer camp that focuses on the Prosper Valley.

**Prosper PLACE as a Community Education Model**

Apart from its role as an effective place-based education model, our data revealed that Prosper PLACE provided Marsh Billings National Park and the community with a quality community education program. Community members believed that the presence of graduate students conducting research in the Valley, and the combination of educational programs, served three main functions:

- highlighting the unique character of the Prosper Valley;
- bringing together multiple generations of community members from diverse backgrounds to an educational program at a historic site;
- and serving as a stimulus for community dialogue about conservation.

These meaningful outcomes, and a list of suggestions participants had for Prosper PLACE’s future are described below. The last section touches upon use of graduate students as the researcher in the community.¹

**Prosper PLACE Highlights the Unique Character of the Prosper Valley**

Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park staff was excited by the program’s deep success in bringing people out of the woodwork. Often, cultural and educational events are held in Woodstock, the region’s cultural and economic hub. The focus on four towns brought together people who do not typically gather for community events. People who may not participate in a park event, or otherwise come to a nature talk or attend an event at their town’s historical society, came together for events that focused on both the cultural and the natural history aspects of their community. As one Marsh Billings National Historical Park staff member shared, “Prosper PLACE brought in a set of folks that don’t come to the park’s programs. They came became this was their story and their place. These people are important to the Valley’s future.”

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“Our motivation is that we really care about this place. We are trying to work with the Valley; we care about the fate of the farms and the quality and character of this place. Over 90 people came to each presentation and recognized the special place they live. It’s all about building relationships and providing people a way to share their perspective and stories in different ways.”

- Marsh Billings National Historical Park Staff Member
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¹ This conversation that came up several times with interviewees and program staff. Because participants were not asked systematically about their thoughts on this topic, it is offered here because PLACE is experimenting with various program models. The insight gained might be useful in celebrating the good work the students did, and in training future Field Naturalists who become PLACE consultants.
Community members agreed. Interviewees stated that the greatest value of Prosper PLACE was bringing people together to celebrate the special character of the Prosper Valley, a scenic agricultural Valley that many passionately worry is being “threatened”, “lost”, or “ruined” by development and habitat fragmentation. The combination of workshops and field trips “heightened the community’s awareness of this special place” and its potential demise.

People enjoyed “renewing old” or “making new” contacts with other community members. Because the field trips included more time for discussion, they were noted as an especially good way to interact with others. One couple new to the area shared that since they moved here two years ago, they have not yet had the opportunity to know any of the “old timers” who work the land, and that, “because of Prosper PLACE we at least know these people are in their community”.

Most of the participants who were interviewed for the evaluation are already quite involved in their community. They are active in the local historical societies, volunteer for the Green Mountain Club and the Appalachian Trail Club, are on the selectboard or Conservation Commissions, volunteer for community suppers and local celebrations, and work to protect wetlands and vernal pools in the area. Three participants came from families that went back several generations. Given the strong representation of involved, knowledgeable community members, it is understandable that, in general, those participants thought that the program mainly reinforced how they already felt about the community; but that it did not change how they relate to or participate in the community. Comments such as, “This is what I do anyway,” or “This is how I think,” were common.

PLACE Provides Tools for Reading the Landscape

Prosper PLACE reaffirmed participants’ deep seated passion for the region. People were quick to offer that the program was meaningful and taught them something new. Survey respondents were particularly enthusiastic, and listed a number of diverse details. People noted that the program brought together cultural and natural history in a unique way and provided them “the tools to look at the landscape and the community in a different way” and gave them a chance to practice using the “pieces, patterns, and processes” approach to reading the landscape.

One participant remembered visiting a forest during the summer institute, and looking at photos from fifty years ago that showed how the forest was previously agricultural fields. Gaining that historical perspective about landscape change was new for him. Another went on the field trip to Dana Hill, a place he had visited decades earlier as a child. The visit brought back memories for him, as he retold tales of visiting the resident farmer in the hilltop home.
Many interviewees had strong backgrounds in history, botany, entomology, forestry, or wetlands, or were active in their community’s historical society. Similar to their feedback about the program’s impact on community involvement, they did not believe the program significantly impacted their knowledge of the region. Nearly all of the interviewees suggested because of their personal knowledge base, they may not have gained as much new information as someone who is a novice.

The use of the historic Prosper Valley Community Building was an additional bonus for residents. Many participants at the evening presentations had never used the building or recognized its significance as a community landmark. One Woodstock resident commented, “I didn’t know about the Prosper Meeting House; now I look at that building and know that it’s a community thing. That is nice.”

**PLACE Stimulate Dialogue about Conservation**

“My personal reason for participating was that I wanted to support the process. I wanted to add a higher profile to this area; public support will be helpful if we try to work with the Vermont Land Trust or Upper Valley Land Trust. I would love to see some kind of protection program and using conservation easements for continuing an agricultural component in this value.”

- Woodstock Resident and Selectman

During interviews, questions about what they had gained from the program quickly turned to their impetus for participating in the program—not so much to learn something new for themselves or to meet their neighbors, but to be part of something that they hoped will stimulate community dialogue and more active support of conservation. As one person asserted, PLACE “…brings older people who are skeptical about conservation and zoning out. But then those people go home and that’s it.” They wanted help figuring out what the next step should be to reign in support for conservation.

A Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park staff member explained that the Prosper PLACE program is part of their larger role as an educational organization and as a neighbor, noting that

Prosper PLACE and Where Our Towns Meet are many steps down a long path. The Park is not the solution but it is part of the community and it can help; [conservation] will have to be a community effort to really happen. We’re there as a neighbor and we want to do what we can do.

Participants stated strongly that Prosper PLACE and the publication of Where Our Towns Meet is a good starting point, but it is not enough. They shared stories of local and state projects that could serve as examples for what could be done to conserve the Prosper Valley. They talked about the amount of work it takes to succeed in large conservation projects, and how difficult it is to find the right mix of local volunteers—from the four towns—who will stay committed throughout a four-town effort to conservation. While there was a general understanding that community members needed to play a key role in making this happen, participants were equally outspoken that Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park, and/or programs like Prosper PLACE, could play a more active role in educating the public, and stimulating and shaping that movement.

A local forester’s sentiments provide an example of many of the participants’ sentiments. He wants to work with Park staff to initiate discussions about protecting habitat corridors adjacent to the park,
but that, knows like many people who need to work, he is limited by how much extra he can volunteer his time. He asserts that while it is “pretty obvious” that PLACE is about making people aware of the region’s “natural beauty” and that it has “brought people together to talk about this place”, that “someone” has to push the conservation agenda. He maintains that,

> The PLACE program brought me a bit closer together with the Park so we can work together to do some land conversation. I see the Park as partner--the Park obviously wants wildlife to be there; I’ll go with park staff and work with local landowners, but I have a business to run and I don’t have a lot of time to chase people for years and years.

Others shared his concern and understand that while Marsh Billings National Historical Park needs to be cautious in how they are perceived by the public, they are “too sensitive” and need to do more than sow the seed for dialogue. One selectman shared this perspective,

> I was only somewhat satisfied with Prosper PLACE. I am well aware that the National Park Service does not want to be seen as the driver (in conservation efforts). But they are too sensitive; the public expects that this is what they do and they should play more of a leadership role. I have heard some positive things from people who participated in Prosper PLACE and the community meeting about the book, but I haven’t seen a next step or a plan for a next step.

Suggestions to increase the program’s focus on conservation were stronger from participants who had taken part in the Where Our Towns Meet meeting in Barnard.

### The Landscape Analysis Researcher

The relationship between the UVM student researchers and the community influenced some peoples’ perceptions of the overall quality and impact of the program. Not all people brought up this topic, and the evaluation did not attempt to be conclusive as to whether or not it was better for the researcher to be a local expert or someone from afar. However, because PLACE is experimenting with various models, insights into the pros and the cons of each approach are offered in the event that they are useful for program planning and management.

Park staff eloquently summarized why using graduate students can be helpful in opening up residents to the research process,

> There are benefits and drawbacks to both. Students are able to have conversations with residents because they see the students as people who are new to the area and learning; an expert may be intimidating or have more of an agenda, especially if it is someone from the area.

They believe that any “hurdles” presented by using students who are less experienced and transient can be overcome with training and program oversight.
Some people suggested that because the researchers were students from the University, it brought more value to the program. They believed that having outsiders from the University who were interested in researching the area helped residents to see how special the area was. Furthermore, participants were unanimous in their appreciation for the researchers’ enthusiasm for the region. Survey respondents had glowing remarks for the presenters’ enthusiasm and depth of knowledge.

Interviewees had mixed feelings, however, about the content and quality of the presentations. Five participants felt that the presentations were “repetitive”, that they put “too much focus on the students’ research technique” and “did not include enough content” and they “didn’t go deep enough” with their research and focused too much time on Dana Hill. The limited content covered may be a reason that many interviewees did not feel that the program significantly impacted their relationship to or knowledge about the landscape or the community.

And finally, people questioned what would happen to the students’ research findings once they were gone. They questioned the value of an outsider coming in, doing research, providing educational opportunities, and soon thereafter leaving with the stories and data that they collected.

### Participant Suggestions for Prosper PLACE’s Future

- Offer more field trips to historic sites.
- Provide more handouts during the presentations that summarize what is being taught.
- Explore a diversity of sites that represent different natural communities: wetlands, fields, and forests.
- Continue integrating the public programs with educators and students.
- In future presentations, focus on more than a few select sites and stories.
- Focus at least a portion of the presentations and field trips on current issues.
- Provide additional and ongoing support for educational programs in the schools.
- Integrate Prosper PLACE with the Where Our Towns Meet publication.
- Provide a place to share additional content and resources produced by students.
- Host public programs and activities that allow people to reflect upon their relationship to the community and the land.
- Include more information on how Native Americans used the land.
- Offer interactive programs that provide residents an opportunity to share their own histories through dialogue, storytelling, sharing old photos, artifacts and mementos, etc.
- Stimulate interaction between community members by including a meal at presentations.
- Host additional multiple-town events.
- Include more discussions about conservation.
- Provide community members with resources that contribute to conservation activities.
- Host meetings that focus on land planning and conservation. Bring together landowners, Marsh Billings National Historical Park, selectboard members, the planning commission, and others from all four towns.
- Find ways to continue to make the research’s findings usable in the future.
- Make accessible to the community the stories and information that the researchers discovered throughout the summer.
Conclusions and Recommendations
Based on an analysis of the evaluation data, conclusions about and recommendations for the PLACE program were drawn, and are presented in several distinct sections below:

- Conversations about Conservation
- Community Education and the Value of PLACE
- Teachers and Community Members as the “Core Team”
- Prosper PLACE as a Professional Development Model
- PLACE as a Gateway Community Program

Conversations about Conservation
Prosper PLACE, as a Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park program, is in a delicate position regarding their role in conserving the Prosper Valley. Local residents see the Park as being in a unique position to play a stronger role: the Park is perceived as having the staff, the resources, and the need for land conservation in order to maintain rich, contiguous habitat. While this is not a new discussion about the role of the Park in conservation efforts, it is heightened by the work that Prosper PLACE has done to bring the value of the region into the public’s eye.

Building relationships and managing expectations as to what those relationships mean is difficult to navigate between people and organizations. These activities take time and patience, and at times a clear articulation of intentions. The conversations about conservation that have developed partially as a result of Prosper PLACE and the Where Our Towns Meet publication may need to be more openly addressed at some point by MBRNHP staff and community members. Community members may need to be provided with the forum, the tools, and the resources to jump start conservation efforts and locate the volunteers who can more deeply engage in conservation efforts. Alternatively, Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park and PLACE staff may choose to state why they cannot take a more active role.

Community Education and the Value of Place
Providing an educational and enjoyable venue for people to learn about and celebrate the unique and endangered place they live is perhaps the program’s most valuable impact. Community members were overwhelmingly positive about Prosper PLACE and believe wholeheartedly in its value to bring together people of diverse backgrounds and conservation philosophies. Almost everyone who filled out a survey or was interviewed said the program taught them something new or helped them see the land in a different light. That is strong community feedback.

If the program aims to have a greater impact on peoples’ relationship to the landscape and their community, program staff and researchers would benefit from carefully planning educational events that include more opportunities for discussion, interaction, and reflection. Providing these types of activities would ramp up the program’s impact. Perhaps the program could partner with local organizations and individuals to provide people more opportunities to share their own stories publicly, either in storytelling, writing articles for the newspaper, or giving tours of their farm, sugarbush, or cellar holes on their property. Including activities that invite people to reflect about their relationship to the land and their community would also enhance the program.

More deeply considering the interviewees’ response to the program content may help PLACE to train researchers. While people who completed the survey were extremely positive about their
experience, others felt it would have been better quality if the presentations had gone into greater depth and included a greater diversity of stories and content. PLACE staff could provide training to help guide students towards the level of depth and diversity to aim for, and possibly review presentation content before it is brought to the public.

If the evaluation had included a greater number of respondents whose pre-existing level of community engagement were not so high, perhaps we would have revealed that the PLACE program does indeed have a greater impact on community involvement.

**Teachers and Community Members as the “Core Team”**

The Prosper PLACE program brought community resources, community members, and teachers together as a core team. Teachers and community members spoke freely about this being one of the benefits of the program. In Prosper PLACE, several community members were part of the core team and assisted the graduate students in their research, and to some degree assisted in developing and marketing the program. However, the teachers were considered by program staff to be the heart of the core team and therefore, were brought together more frequently and provided resources to develop their curriculum. Community members who took part in the Institute were aware of the work the teachers had done, and believed that the program should continue to work closely with teachers.

In some PLACE towns, the program does not include such a strong teacher development module and therefore focuses more strongly on engaging the town leaders as members of the core team. Some variants of the program also include a civic engagement module. These two pieces may contribute to increased involvement by community members in preparing for presentations and using the PLACE program as a tool for community development and future planning.

Future Prosper PLACE work, and PLACE projects with other towns, will continue to benefit from including a strong representation of teachers in the core team. However, when less attention and fewer resources are used to also include active participation by non-teachers on the core team, the core team may not pitch in as strongly to support the program and its future. It will be important for PLACE towns and staff to assess what the primary goal of the PLACE program is in each locale, and use human, community, and financial resources wisely to help achieve those goals.

**Prosper PLACE as a Professional Development Model**

Prosper PLACE was a particularly strong teacher professional development program. Its success can be attributed to a suite of factors: the program providing the spark of an idea, an easily useable site, the teachers’ prior training in place-based education, the stipends and grant money that supported their efforts, and the enthusiasm, research and resources provided by the UVM graduate students and Marsh Billings National Historical Park.

The beauty of the PLACE model is that it is adaptable to the unique needs and resources of a community. The teachers who participated had been through extensive training in place-based education as part of the Forest for Every Classroom program. They had been bitten by the place-based education bug and were hungry for a place to implement hypothetical ideas. If other PLACE programs seek to work with a less motivated or less experienced group of teachers, teachers would have needed additional training and support. The UVM students provided just enough content, enthusiasm and support to give teachers what they needed to develop a solid curriculum. And
money sweetened the pot – it honored their position as educators and provided them the resources to complete a service-learning project with their enrichment class.

The Woodstock teachers are committed to a team teaching approach; their sincere enjoyment of one another and their shared belief in interdisciplinary studies is also important to consider. They each contributed their own expertise and time to the project, and relied upon their working relationships to know tasks would be accomplished. Consequently, their vision come to fruition. Due to their teachers’ cohesiveness, students participating in the Prosper PLACE curriculum had the opportunity to experience a seamless transition between science, global studies, English and math.

**PLACE as a Gateway Community Program**

The PLACE program is a sound community education model that the NPS can easily adapt to fit each park’s unique needs. Community participation was high, and feedback about the intent and outcome of the program was overwhelmingly positive. The program brings together diverse community members to celebrate their region’s cultural and natural history. The program is a catalyst for people acknowledging the importance of their region, imparting new knowledge on community members, and supporting or initiating place-based education programs. PLACE Program elements and outcomes that make it particularly useful to parks of varying sizes and geographic regions include:

- Holding the workshops and presentations in buildings and on land that is not within the park boundaries helps people to value the region beyond the Park’s borders.

- The program is flexible. Each park can determine where to focus research efforts (e.g. the town level, watershed level, multiple town level, etc.) and how to present the stories about their particular region to community members.

- Parks can decide whether and how to couple the program with other educational efforts. If they want it to be used to share other programs that the Park offers, such as a publication like Where Our Towns Meet, it can be adapted to do that.

- The core team can be developed as NPS staff sees fit, either focusing more heavily on educators, town leaders, or some combination of the two.

- Researchers can use the Park as a focal point, or they can broaden the scope to include more of the land and communities adjacent to the park.

- The Park can use the program as a way to attract people who may not typically be drawn to Park-specific activities or who may feel that they have already ‘done’ enough with the Park.

- The Park can use the program as a catalyst for initiating place-based education programs.

- The Park can use the Program to capitalize on in-house staff, programs, and resources.

- Teachers who are already immersed in place-based education activities can work with the Park in new or different ways.
• By offering a variety of programs through PLACE, the Park can become the networker between community members, educators, and students.

• As a partner in PLACE, the Park can develop its role as a community member and neighbor.

• People see the Park as a partner in community enhancement and conservation.

• Local researchers or graduate students can be used as consultants, depending on relationships with local universities and the availability of local expertise within the community.

• A combination of community engagement trainings and planning meetings can be used to further develop the core team and community involvement with the project.

• A local resident or partnering organization can be hired for a nominal stipend to continue offering modest programs throughout the years following PLACE. This continues to utilize research and material brought forth by the landscape analyst, and adds continued value to the program. (These last two suggestions have been tried and deemed extremely successful in other PLACE towns (e.g. Putney and Hinesburg).

PLACE can be part of a longer term effort, or act as a stand alone educational program. It will benefit National Parks that the program can stimulate community conversations about land conservation. The National Park Service’s strategy about its role in conservation, and how the PLACE program fits into the process, may need to be more clearly articulated to the public.