

The Phoenix Project acts as intermediary

Petersburg's vision is to bring together higher education and nonprofit organizations in economically stressed cities

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PETERSBURG — In early 2006, Greg Werkheiser began to share a vision he had for Petersburg that included the colleges and universities in the state. This vision, called the Phoenix Project, was to act as an intermediary between higher education and nonprofit organizations in economically stressed cities in Virginia.

The first step was to build a relationship between the city and 15 students from the College of William and Mary in a pilot program over the summer of 2006.

"We started slowly, matching students and faculty with short-term projects that we could complete quickly, show results, and earn credibility," said Werkheiser, who is executive director of the Phoenix Project.

"Now our university partners are grateful to be invited to help year-round with some of the city's most pressing and complex challenges and exciting opportunities."

The students, who lived and worked in the city for eight weeks last summer, participating in direct service projects as well as doing volunteer work for several organizations in the city. Law students in the pilot program also logged many hours of legal service in the legal aid justice center.

"When you have people who are willing to be a part of you, you can take a bit more comfort in believing that they're working in your best interest," said Petersburg Mayor Annie M. Mickens in August.

Their work over the summer also included creating City Soul, a blending of food, music and feedback to showcase the different organizations working within Petersburg and to give them an opportunity to share ideas with each other.

The students were able to attract over 30 nonprofit organizations within the city, most of which they had helped over the summer.



Petersburg Mayor Annie Mickens (right) speaks to William and Mary College students working with the Phoenix Project in the city.

"The sophistication of the work and ideas we have witnessed these young students generate is inspiring" said the Rev. Robert Diggs Jr. of Tabernacle Baptist Church, which hosted the space for City Soul. "It adds significant value to our community."

From this pilot program, William and Mary, as well as Virginia State University students, worked in their spare time and over breaks on projects for the city.

"We are eager to find new ways to be of service to our neighbors in the city of Petersburg, while increasing the opportunities to improve teaching and learning at our institution," said VSU Provost Dr. W. Eric Thomas.

"We are pleased to be able to work through the Phoenix Project to focus these efforts and to deepen our relationship with this historic and important city."

By April 2007, the Phoenix Project grew to include participation from Richard Bland College and the University of Richmond. Altogether, about 70 projects for 40 nonprofit organizations and city agencies were accomplished with over 250 students, faculty, staff and alumni of these schools, Werkheiser said.

"The thing that I've enjoyed the most about working in Petersburg has been learning from community members themselves," said Sarah Miller, a William and Mary law student who participated in the summer pilot program and also returned for the spring 2007 semester.

"It has provided a great education that you just can't get from the traditional academic experience."

The learning went in both directions, Mickens said.

"Just as the capacity of our nonprofit organizations and city agencies has been expanded by the extra hands and minds of our many university friends, so too have we been able to help them find educational value in our shared work."

Over the summer, the Phoenix Project will expand its Nonprofit Leadership Program to about 40 students from many of the state's colleges and universities.

"We were so encouraged by the successes of the pilot that we are taking the program to scale this year," Forsyth said. "This is the first program of its kind in Virginia, where students from all over can study nonprofit leadership and civic entrepreneurship and then put their knowledge into action working with community organizations."

As the Phoenix Project progresses, Werkheiser hopes that it can serve as an example of what is possible between other cities and universities in the state.

"The residents of Petersburg know better than anyone the challenges and opportunities facing the city, and they have a good handle on possible solutions, but what is lacking is the extra hands and minds needed to get all the work done," Werkheiser said.

"That's where these universities can provide real value at the same time they improve the learning and teaching opportunities for their students and faculty. Petersburg is becoming a model of cooperation and collaboration for communities and universities across Virginia."

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Some of the tasks performed by the Phoenix Project

- Providing more than 5,000 hours of staff support and direct service to community organizations and city agencies.
- Mapping social, economic, and environmental data using GIS technology to increase accuracy of community development plans.
- Documenting the architecture of more than 200 structures in the historically significant Halifax Triangle neighborhoods as the foundation for future preservation and revitalization.
- Preparing a federal funding proposal to support substantial revitalization of a distressed neighborhood.
- Recommending improvements to the city code to allow better enforcement of blight laws against absentee landlords.
- Assisting renovation of a new outreach facility to provide social services to low-income citizens.
- Repairing and modifying homes of senior citizens and the disabled.
- Exploring legal remedies for environmental pollution in the city.
- Securing \$25,000 worth of new books and providing them free to all 4th and 5th graders.
- Encouraging students from Petersburg's public housing projects to apply for scholarships enabling them to attend Virginia State University.
- Designing civic leadership and college preparatory programs for top performing students at Petersburg High School (to be piloted this fall).
- Expanding the City's ability to reduce lead paint poisoning of children.
- Providing more than 2,300 hours of legal service, including expanding legal services to low-income residents.
- Securing nonprofit status for new civic efforts.
- Ensuring that existing nonprofit organizations have legally proper governing documents and comply with state and federal tax reporting requirements.
- Crafting and implementing marketing plans for nonprofit organizations to increase community awareness of available services and increase volunteer capacity.
- Conducting with Virginia State University staff a grant-writing workshop for Petersburg nonprofit directors and city officials.
- Assisting with development and grant-writing efforts of community organizations and municipal agencies.
- Conducting more than 250 individual meetings with elected and appointed officials, residents, nonprofit and faith-based leaders to identify their top economic and community development goals;
- Launching City Soul, an event with musical entertainment that convened 35 nonprofit and city agencies and engaged community members in identifying community challenges and assets; and
- Convening meetings of leaders of distinct redevelopment initiatives and related nonprofit missions to maximize coordination, cooperation and sharing of best practices.