

THRIVE 2055 Internship

The tri-state area within Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama is growing at an accelerated rate, which will greatly affect the region's economic development, transportation, education and workforce, and natural resources. Therefore, there is a serious need for collaboration and planning beyond county and state lines in order to accommodate the recent growth. Thrive 2055 is a nonprofit regional initiative that assist local businesses, citizens, organizations, and government representatives with collaborating and exploring courses of action to deal with our region's accelerated growth. The initiative focuses on a 16-county tri-state region within Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama. Thrive 2055 works to recognize regional issues and then works to induce collaboration between groups that can solve these issues. My responsibilities as an intern were to carry out research, summarize public and private input documents, create video projects to promote regional assets, attend meetings, and carry out interviews with various chair members.

I developed and improved many skills during my internship, such as writing skills, research skills, video editing, communication, and critical thinking. One particular project I developed valuable skills from was a series of video projects I completed for the natural treasures initiative of Thrive 2055. I filmed and edited a series of videos that promoted outdoor recreational and conservation opportunities within the region. One video project followed a paddling trip down the Hiwassee River. Various organizations and individuals

are working to have the Hiwassee River designated as a national blueway, which requires numerous qualifications. The video follows the paddling trip of various individuals that are significant to the blueway designation project, and was used to by the groups to present the Hiwassee River Blueway project. The final video of the series promoted Stringer's Ridge, a 92-acre wilderness park in the midst of urban Chattanooga, and also promoted bike travel throughout the city. The purposes of the videos were to promote the region's outdoor recreation opportunities, but also connect Thrive 2055's initiatives. For example, the Stringer's Ridge video promoted an outdoor recreation opportunity in the city, the preservation of a forested ridge that was previously threatened by development, and also promoted bike transportation in the city by demonstrating how easy bike travel through downtown was. The Hiwassee Blueway video promoted a project that would improve outdoor recreation opportunities, help ensure that an ecologically significant river is protected, and attract tourism to the area which would boost the local economy. My Hiwassee River video became one of the most viewed videos on Thrive 2055's YouTube channel, which has increased public awareness of the Hiwassee River Blueway.

Possibly the most beneficial project I did was convening a series of interviews with various chair members. These interviews served as follow up meetings to Thrive 2055's large monthly group meetings. By carrying out the one-on-one interviews we were able to receive valuable information from members that would otherwise not have been expressed in a large group environment. We were also able to ask specific questions to the members

pertaining to their particular expertise, such as project recommendations and identifying how Thrive 2055 could offer help. After completing the interviews, I compiled the information into a comprehensive document that was used by Thrive 2055 to identify high priority projects. During these interviews I gained communication skills and writing skills. Having little experience with interviewing, I quickly realized the right questions must be asked in order to have a productive interview. After I improved my methodology for carrying out the interviews, I was able to more actively engage the members and receive valuable information and recommendations for Thrive 2055.

When I first arrived at Thrive 2055, I found it difficult to get a grasp on what the initiative was doing. Since Thrive 2055 was a public-private initiative that induces action from other groups and individuals, it was difficult to see any immediate concrete results from their work. However, over time I began to realize the value of the work Thrive 2055 was doing. The common practice of limiting one's work scope to county and state lines was severely limiting the region's potential. In reality, any change in one county can have profound effects on the entire region. One example that showed me the importance of working within a regional scope beyond state and county lines was when Thrive 2055's economic development group was discussing how each county would agree upon working together to bring a certain large cooperation into the region. Rather than having each county in competition with each other, which had been occurring in the past, the group agreed to collaborate to ensure that the cooperation was brought to the region instead of

choosing another area of the country. If a large company built a facility in a nearby county, the entire region reaps the benefits. Without a collaborative effort like Thrive 2055, many opportunities could be lost that would greatly benefit the region.

There was one phrase that continued to come up during my internship, “there is no reason to reinvent the wheel.” The phrase was first brought up when a chair member introduced a regional planning model that had been previously used in another area by a different planning organization. The model already had the methodology in place that had proven to be successful, a hurdle that the Thrive 2055 group had been struggling with. The chair member proposed that we use that model rather than spending countless hours coming up with a new model that was meant to accomplish the same goals. By using a slightly altered version of the previous model, the group was able to accomplish much more than if they would have attempted to reinvent their own model. I also discovered that many separate groups were unknowingly working on similar projects throughout the region. By inducing a collaborative effort, the groups were able to join forces and accomplish much more than if they would have continued to work independently. The lesson I have taken away is that in any type of work, it is important to be aware of similar endeavors, not only to seek guidance, but also to explore the possibility of creating partnerships that will benefit both groups and help reach shared goals.

I learned many valuable lessons from my internship, developed new skills, and also developed new career goals. After seeing such a small group take on a tremendous project

like Thrive 2055 has done, I have been inspired to not be deterred by how large the scope of an undertaking may be. I was exposed to various groups and individuals that were single handedly making a regional impact in attempt to improve the community. I have learned that I too have the capability to undertake similar endeavors, and one person or idea can certainly make a difference. Whether or not I work in a regional planning oriented field, I hope that my future career is focused on improving the community. Since my interests are in environmental science and economics, I hope to work in a field where I can have a positive and lasting effect on environmental conditions and the communities within.