Student projects focused on helping Appalachia re-brand and build interest around the town’s rich heritage in a beautiful setting, including a model train exhibit (left).

Sample of interactive educational plaque sponsored by Rails to Trails community partners (above) and rendering of Trail passing though Bee Rock Tunnel (left).

Using GIS, students created a series of brochures (right) highlighting assets important to both the community and potential visitors.

In the fall of 2012, economic development students worked in collaboration with the Town of Appalachia (population 1,759) and LENOWISCO Planning District Commission to explore and enhance economic opportunities in this struggling coalfield town in Wise County. Utilizing an asset-based development strategy and directly engaging community leaders for direction, students worked in four teams to support existing projects to expand natural and cultural heritage tourism.

Students served the Appalachian Cultural Arts Center by facilitating grant support and conducting a visioning session to guide its board’s future direction and connect with other regional efforts. Renderings of a planned Rails-to-Trails project provided residents with a glimpse of what to expect as it winds through the famous Bee Rock Tunnel.

The work of the class continued into the spring semester and highlights the evolving partnership between the Appalachian Prosperity Project at UVA and university, industry, and nonprofit partners in Southwest Virginia.