



Collaboration Creates Community

The *Town-Gown Taskforce* is comprised of downtown retailers, restaurateurs, and professionals, business and community leaders, and students, staff and faculty of SUNY Oneonta and Hartwick College.

Their collective mission is the identification, creation and establishment of an infrastructure for mutual connection and support that serves to engage our colleges and the downtown business community in collaborative efforts that strengthen their relationship with bonds forged of a shared purpose.

The equation is: collaboration = education = understanding = empathy = respect = community.

The following is a short history, an update on plans and progress, and an invitation.

HISTORY:

The Taskforce was born of a directive of Mayor Gary Herzig to the 8th Ward Councilman, to seek an avenue to work with the colleges to mitigate the negative publicity following the fall semester spike in COVID infection and its deleterious effect on the downtown shopping district.

Three concerns were identified:

- The public's false perception regarding the relative safety of shopping in Oneonta
- Some community members' distrust (and resentment) of the student population
- The lack of respect (and welcome) felt by a number of college students.

The latter two of these concerns had long been percolating, and the “silver lining” of this pandemic-driven effort was that they would finally be addressed.

A meeting was held on September 16th with a group that included students, college staff, business owners, and the City council member. Weekly meetings continued until October 23rd.

In that short period, the group made progress in its address of the concerns detailed above.

To provide accurate public information regarding the relative safety of a visit to Oneonta, the group solicited and received locally specific data regarding infection rates. A chart was created, maintained, and shared on a daily basis via social media and on the SupportOneonta.com site.



A Notable Success: “Town-Gown” Collaborations on Main Street Events

As the calendar turned to October, one of our business owner/ committee members suggested the creation of scarecrows for display on Main Street. This idea was embraced enthusiastically, and it was determined that the scarecrows could incorporate various “branding” that identified them as the collaborative creations of both students and businesses.

Throughout a warm and sunny Saturday, business owners and employees worked with students and staff from the colleges to plan, construct and mount scarecrows that would decorate Main Street for weeks to come.

The project was a resounding success, with many positive connections made and relationships formed.

Equally as important, the engagement of students in the enhancement of our shared quality of life was promoted via social media and in reports on radio, in the local newspaper and in the internal publications of the colleges.

Our success in the creation of autumn decoration led to an obvious next step in the campaign to integrate college students into the safe promotion of downtown.

On Saturday, October 31st, several dozen students, gloved and masked, again volunteered their time on Main Street.

Sitting in for busy merchants, logistically unable to greet “trick-or-treaters” on the sidewalk while simultaneously assisting customers in their stores, the students provided hundreds of young children and their families with one of the most memorable Halloweens in anyone’s experience.

It was a great day for Main Street and for “Town-Gown” partnership.



NEXT STEPS:

With the looming Thanksgiving and winter breaks, the Taskforce suspended meetings.

A February restart having been planned, the interim time was devoted to the development of strategies for a reconstituted and more clearly defined effort that could serve as the foundation for future years of success.

Now co-chaired by the Director of the Career Development Center at SUNY Oneonta and the City Councilman, the Taskforce has been re-imagined to allow significantly more participation within the context of a committee structure. The objectives for each of six committees were more narrowly defined as subsets of the core goals of the Taskforce.

Invitations have been sent and accepted by members of the community, business and the colleges.

Committees will convene once per month (at a minimum) and report to the Town-Gown Taskforce Oversight committee. The TGT Oversight committee will be comprised of its six members as well as one member from each of the committees - for a total of 12.

TGT Oversight will review the progress of the committees and provide direction as necessary. It will meet monthly.

The co-chairs will provide support and resources to three committees each.

TG Taskforce committee structure:

DIALOGUE

To determine avenues for campus / community conversation, determine concerns and action items, and develop strategies to engage students, residents, and business in the creation of empathetic, respectful and constructive relationships.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

To gauge and document the effectiveness of current college interactions with businesses and the community. Identify and develop new opportunities. Create more awareness of the protocols for accessing student assistance for volunteerism, experiential learning, internships and employment.

INTRA-CAMPUS COLLABORATION

To determine opportunities to engage the colleges in support of the business sector, the community, and each other through education, extra-curricular activities and other partnerships

ART AND EXHIBITION

To facilitate and support community members collaborating with students to create and display art installations on the fence at the Westcott Lot, in Muller Plaza, in the Walkway, and in other spaces to be determined

DOWNTOWN ENGAGEMENT

To create a compelling and changeable downtown environment through the design of “self-ie-friendly” and seasonal decoration, as well as other opportunities for “pop-up” entertainments.

PROMOTION

To facilitate and manage the documentation of Town-Gown collaborations and disseminate media-ready press-releases, PSAs, photos and videos.

