



Ride Sharing in Motor City

GLOBAL IMPACT ARTICLE SERIES

As you enter the city, Detroit’s reputation as the Motor City is readily apparent. With wide streets and long blocks, Detroit is a city made for cars. In many places, it is difficult to access amenities – fresh food, jobs, healthcare – without a vehicle. Focus: HOPE, a Detroit-based non-profit focused on addressing racism, poverty, and injustice launched the HOPE Village initiative to improve the lives of Detroit residents and break the cycle of poverty.

For residents of HOPE Village, which is 100 city blocks surrounding Detroit’s Focus: HOPE campus, it takes an average of 10-30 minutes walking or using public transit to reach a supermarket or health facility. Those with private cars must contend with the costs of parking, gas and maintenance, and the high insurance prices endemic to the city. To address transportation challenges in the community, Focus: HOPE partnered with a team of graduate students from the Dow Sustainability Fellows Program at the University of Michigan (U-M).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Detroit has been attracting the attention of researchers and small businesses for some time now. Many people also see the opportunity to learn about socioeconomic challenges in urban areas, to explore urban sustainability, or to find new markets addressing specific needs. When exploring these opportunities though, it is critical to take into account the opinions of Detroiters and the knowledge they have about their neighborhoods.

Fennell reflected on his work in Afghanistan as a civil engineer. “I learned a lot of lessons in Afghanistan,” Fennell says. “[The process] was so top-down, what was built wasn’t what people wanted, and then it wasn’t being used.” Seeing this, Fennell thought, “Maybe I shouldn’t be the one deciding what to do; I’m not from here.”

WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

During his time in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia, Morse also learned the value of community-led innovation and participatory approaches to problem-solving. With the Detroit project, Fennel and Morse were determined to avoid this disconnect between community-members and “improvement projects.” In that spirit, members of the project team decided to work collaboratively with communities

and existing Detroit nonprofit organizations through the process of community-based participatory research (CBPR). CBPR is an approach to research that involves the community studied in the research project. It originated in the field of public health but has increasingly become an important element in sustainability research.

“CBPR is giving the community a leadership role in any research performed for a project. If people in the community so choose, they are encouraged to participate in everything from project scoping, to implementation, and closeout,” says Fennell.



The CBPR approach recognizes that community context can impact project outcomes (e.g., new/improved services enhancing a community, policy change, etc.), and community members can identify challenges and opportunities for research. The U-M team held multiple focus groups with community members to understand what they disliked about their current transportation situation, what concerns and challenges they faced, and what alternative transportation options might be useful. “Co-creation is central to our business model and development philosophy,” says Morse.

The team determined that many residents are concerned about transportation timeliness and overall safety. Residents are supportive of shared-use mobility services as an alternative to private cars, like Uber or ZipCar, but there are barriers to the access and implementation of transportation services. Credit and data access and security concerns like riding with strangers are some of the barriers mentioned, in addition to education and information about shared transportation services.

NEXT: A NEW NEIGHBORHOOD SHUTTLE

When the U-M team project ended, Focus: HOPE leaders asked the students to continue their work. As a result, two group members, Kenny Fennell, an alumnus of the U-M Ford School of Public Policy, and Benjamin Morse, an alumnus of the Ford School and the School for Environment and Sustainability, created a start-up, Social Mobility Group LLC, and are working on launching a peer-to-peer vansharing service called Caravan. At the time of writing, they are working at U-M’s TechArb Student Venture Accelerator and are looking for partners. If that goes well, they will buy a van to use as a neighborhood shuttle, providing transportation for families. They will collect feedback on how they’re doing and what else the community desires from a shuttle service.

BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

“U-M’s Dow Sustainability Fellows Program changed everything,” says Fennell. “It totally changed my career path.” The program imparted important skills, such as how to interact with different agencies. It gave the team an opportunity to network with Detroit stakeholders, now essential to their work with Caravan, and helped them learn how interdisciplinary teams function. Team members were from multiple U-M schools, they all had very different backgrounds, and “we all had different viewpoints on the problem,” says Fennell. “I really liked that. It led to greater outcomes.” Morse agrees.

“The Dow Sustainability Fellows program offered us an amazing opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary problem solving,” he says. The program’s emphasis on mentorship also provided extensive mentorship for the team. Between the active and applied learning and the mentorship, the program provided us with a lot of support,” says Fennell. “It changed my life.”

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Photo courtesy of Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation (SMART)

TEAM MEMBERS

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- Benjamin Morse, SPP and School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS)
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Made possible by The Dow Chemical Company Foundation, the Dow Sustainability Fellows Program at the University of Michigan supports full-time graduate students and postdoctoral scholars who are committed to finding interdisciplinary, actionable, and meaningful sustainability solutions on local-to-global scales. The program prepares future sustainability leaders to make a positive difference in organizations worldwide. We believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion are key to individual empowerment, and the advancement of sustainability knowledge, learning, and leadership.