

Evaluation of Burlington Geographic's Public Lecture Series Fall 2016

RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY THE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN
VERMONT FIELD STUDIES, GEOGRAPHY 192

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SUMMARY

The Vermont Field Studies class partnered with the University of Vermont's Place Program to conduct an evaluation of the Burlington Geographic public lecture series in fall 2016. The goal of the series was to raise awareness of different aspects of the Burlington community as a place and encourage attendees to develop their own sense of place. The Place Program asked the Vermont Field Studies students to evaluate the lectures and determine who the attendees were, and to make recommendations on how to broaden the audience.

The students used a mixed methods approach to their research. Methods included a survey of audience members, a follow up survey and participant observation. Research was guided by findings from a literature review of work on place-based education.

The research found that attendees rated the series highly. The Burlington Geographic series appealed to a highly educated group of people; 50% of the people who took the survey had a graduate degree. Furthermore, the series drew repeat attendees. However, while the Burlington Geographic lecture series presented a wealth of information and those who responded to the follow up survey indicated they were motivated to change their behavior as a result of the lectures, the series did not appeal to a wide variety of people. The goal of this report then is to provide Burlington Geographic with a set of recommendations in order to increase the diversity of their audience. Recommendations include: adding more diverse lecture locations, holding shorter lectures that may provide child care and or food, partnering with specific community groups to offer presentations tailored to their interests, and creating activity-based events that would engage attendees in experiential learning.

INTRODUCTION

UVM's Place program seeks to *"explore the intersection of natural and cultural history, and to deepen the connection between people and the landscape in which they live"* (Place Program website, <http://www.uvm.edu/place/burlingtongeographic>). Burlington Geographic is one of their community initiatives. The Burlington Geographic public lecture series intended to share knowledge about aspects of the city's physical, social, and cultural geographies with local residents. The series included six free public lectures held at three locations in the city between September and November, 2016. The topics were diverse; ranging from food culture to tree health to energy systems.

The Vermont Field Studies course is an intermediate level, service-learning geography course that provides students the opportunity to learn and apply several research methods through conducting a meaningful project for a community partner. The student project designed for Burlington Geographic aimed to use survey and participant observation methods to evaluate the Burlington Geographic lecture series, and provide recommendations for diversifying the audience. This report is the result of student research and analysis. It is written from the students' perspective.

RESEARCH ON PLACE-BASED LEARNING AND EDUCATION

The existing literature on place-based learning and education provides a context for our findings in this study on the Burlington Geographic lecture series that is helpful in deciding whether or not the lectures were conducted in a meaningful and relevant way. We read and

discussed a selection of scholarly articles that were related to or were in pursuit of the same goal as the lecture series and synthesized our research into the following.

Environmental education works best when it is *hands-on and works in a specific place*, is *not institutionalized*, *reaches all groups* within a community, and ideally starts at an *early age*.

In other words, environmental conservation or place-based learning is most successful when it possesses all of the aforementioned qualities, and is still moderately successful if it only satisfies one or two facets in comparison with not retaining any. While Burlington Geographic was focused on a specific place, thus allowing the lecture series to explore Burlington in depth and through a variety of lenses, the lectures were not hands on, making the embodied learning that is key to successful place-based education virtually nonexistent ¹. The lectures also created a sense of institutionalization since they occurred on a specific schedule and were conducted with structured timing for presentation and discussion. In the literature, structured place-based learning was found to diminish the recipient's ability to apply a holistic mindset to the information being provided and contextualize it in a way that promoted broader thinking ².

The lecture series also tended to cater towards upper middle class, educated, white individuals. This audience, while they may be well equipped to disseminate the information they gleaned from the lectures, did not include the other populations that exist in Burlington

1 Sousa E, Quintino V, Palhas J, Rodrigues AM, Teixeira J. (2016). Can Environmental Education Actions Change Public Attitudes? An Example Using the Pond Habitat and Associated Biodiversity. PLoS ONE 11(5): e0154440. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0154440

2 Dickinson, E. (2011). Displaced in nature: The cultural production of (non-) place in place-based forest conservation pedagogy. Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture, 5(3), 300-319.

(ie. refugees, transient, blue collar) who might not have the privilege to develop a deep sense of place and therefore should in theory be the target audience of this lecture series. Intervention in a community at multiple levels allows for greater changes in behavior and practices to occur both individually and communally. ³ There also were very few children present at any of the lectures. Developing a sense of place at a young age improves future place related decision-making abilities and natural resource planning. ⁴

Overall, while the Burlington Geographic lecture series did provide a comprehensive look at a specific place, it did not do so in a way that engaged a variety of people. This conclusion however is based on the context provided by four sources of scholarly literature and is therefore limited in its reliability of presenting the entirety of successful place-based learning techniques.

METHODS

We employed a mixed-methods approach, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods that included participant observation and questionnaires with quantitative and qualitative questions. We attended each lecture in groups of three or four. We conducted participant observation at the lectures, a method common to human geography and cultural

³ Ng, E.W., & Madyaningrum, M. E. (2014). INITIATING TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS THROUGH COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROGRAM: TWO CASES FROM ASIA. *Journal Of Community Psychology*, 42(5), 609-620. doi: 10.1002/jcop.21641

⁴ Ryan, Sharon M., and Nicole M. Ardoin. "Environmental and Sustainability Education in Natural World Heritage Sites." Report for the Galapagos Conservancy (2011): n.pag. Web.

anthropology. In participant observation, the researcher does more than just seeing and observing, he or she becomes a participant in what is being studied.⁵ Thus, we joined the audience in listening and participating in the BG lectures, while simultaneously taking notes of observations that were important to the central questions of this project.

Additionally, questionnaires were designed to help gauge who attended the lectures, elicit how they felt about the lectures and collect suggestions for future Burlington Geographic lectures. These surveys were, for the most part, administered to the audience during intermission. However, a few were also distributed after the lecture series ended. It is important to note that the majority of people returned their surveys during intermission, which means the survey results do not necessarily represent the public's opinion on the second lecture in every series. A follow-up online questionnaire was administered to audience members who had provided their email in the questionnaires at the lectures. In addition, we read other studies of place-based education to provide a context for our study.

The statistical program SPSS 23 was used to analyze the quantitative results while the qualitative responses were hand-coded. Together these two methods helped organize the data and break it up into themes. Altogether, this mixed-methods approach that employed participant observation and questionnaires with qualitative and quantitative questions, has helped us gauge to how we can help Burlington Geographic better achieve their goal of fostering a sense of place for people in Burlington, Vermont.

⁵ Kearns, R. (2010). Seeing with clarity: Undertaking observational research. . In Hay, I, *Qualitative research method in human geography* (3rd ed., pp. 241-258). Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press.

FINDINGS

Results of Burlington Geographic Lecture Evaluations

We collected a total of 188 evaluations from the six lectures. Overall, the attendees found the BG lectures to be effective or very effective in information sharing, entertainment, and presentation style (4.4 average on 1-5 Likert scale, with 5 as very effective). They also generally found the time and location to be convenient (4.3 out of 5, and 4.4, respectively). Just one lecture received a significantly lower overall rating. Demographic data from the evaluation respondents shows the groups of people the lecture series attracted.

The vast majority of those who responded to the surveys were white, well-educated people who grew up outside of Vermont. The BG audience was 92.2% white, falling between the State of Vermont's and Chittenden County percent white populations of 95.1% and 91.9% (US Census data). More female than male respondents to the survey: 60% female and 39% male, with 'Gender Neutral' and 'Transgender' making up for the last 1%.

The state of Vermont differs from Chittenden county in age demographics. Where the state is much older, Chittenden has a much larger population of people under 25. The largest age group who attended the BG lectures was 46-64 year olds. The other main age group was 18-24 year olds. The 18-24 crowd was almost entirely comprised of students from out of state who have lived in Vermont for 0-5 years. They heard about the lecture series from word of mouth, email, and opportunities given by professors for extra credit. The people aged 46-64 were almost all from out of state as well, having moved to Vermont 15 or more years ago. Most

of them work in the business or education, or are retired, and heard about the lecture series through word of mouth. This indicates that the people who came to the lecture series fell into two main categories: students who are new to Burlington and have a desire to learn about it, and people who have chosen to live in Burlington and work as educators or have an enthusiasm for place-based education.

Respondents by Age and Duration in Vermont									
			Age?						Total
			A. 0-17	B. 18-24	C. 25-35	D. 36-45	E. 46-64	F. 65+	
How long have you lived in Vermont?	A. 0-5 years	Count	2	29	19	2	3	2	57
		% within Age?	100.0%	78.4%	63.3%	10.5%	4.6%	6.3%	30.8%
	B. 6-15 years	Count	0	1	5	10	3	5	24
		% within Age?	0.0%	2.7%	16.7%	52.6%	4.6%	15.6%	13.0%
	C. more than 15 years	Count	0	1	1	4	47	23	76
		% within Age?	0.0%	2.7%	3.3%	21.1%	72.3%	71.9%	41.1%
		Count	0	6	5	3	12	2	28

	D. All of your life	% within Age?	0.0%	16.2%	16.7%	15.8%	18.5%	6.3%	15.1%
Total	Count		2	37	30	19	65	32	185
	% within Age?		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 1. Cross-tabulation of Age and Duration in Vermont

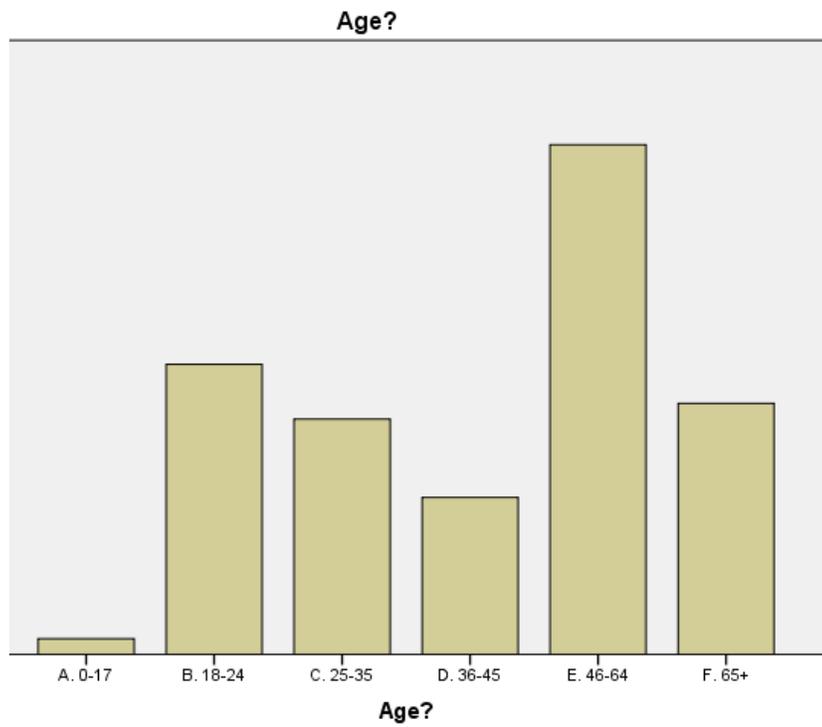


Figure 1. Evaluation Respondents by Age Category

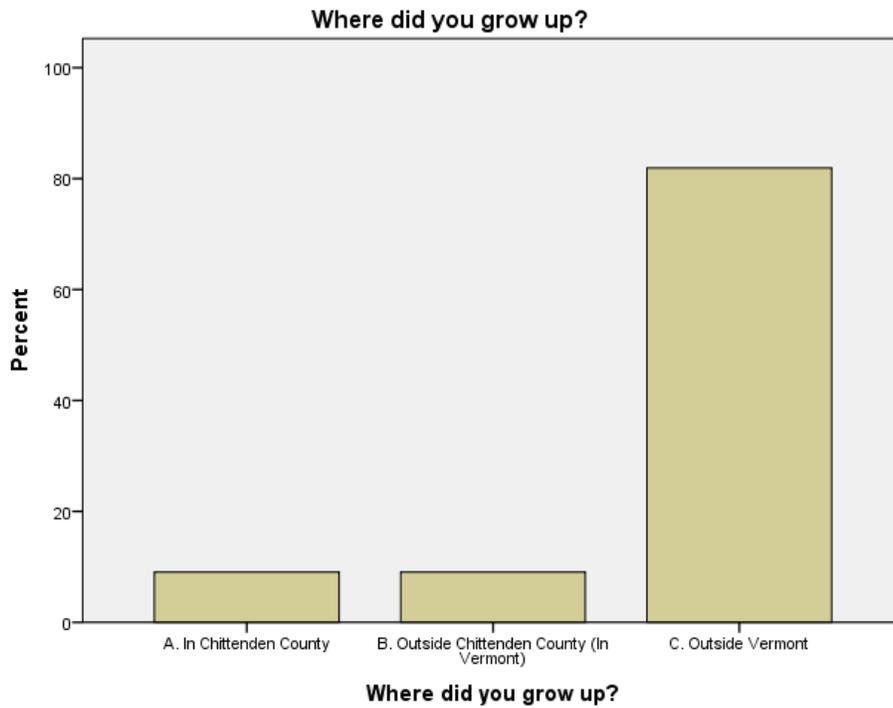


Figure 2. Evaluation Respondents by Where They Grew Up

Respondents by Where They Grew Up and Years in Vermont							
			How long have you lived in Vermont?				Total
			A. 0-5 years	B. 6-15 years	C. more than 15 years	D. All of your life	
Where did you grow up?	A. In Chittenden County	Count	0	0	1	16	17
		% within How long have you lived in Vermont?	0.0%	0.0%	1.3%	57.1%	9.1%
		Count	1	0	4	12	17

	B. Outside Chittenden County (In Vermont)	% within How long have you lived in Vermont?	1.7%	0.0%	5.3%	42.9%	9.1%
	C. Outside Vermont	Count	57	24	71	0	152
		% within How long have you lived in Vermont?	98.3%	100.0%	93.4%	0.0%	81.7%
Total		Count	58	24	76	28	186
		% within How long have you lived in Vermont?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of Where Respondents Grew Up and Duration in Vermont

Of the 188 people who participated in the Burlington Geographic survey, 186 responded to the question regarding their highest level of educational attainment. All of the participants who responded to this question were high school graduates, and approximately 50 % of them (93 people) stated that they had earned a graduate degree. The other half of respondents stated that they had attained a bachelor’s degree (26.1%) or were still enrolled in college at the time of the lecture (18.1%). Very few people who responded to the survey listed Associate’s degree (3.2%), some college (2.1%), or High School Diploma or GED (.5%) as their highest level

of educational attainment. These results indicate that all of the respondents, with the exception of one, had some degree of upper level education, and that roughly half of those with upper level education were highly educated, meaning that they had a received a graduate degree. This is remarkable because in Chittenden County, less than 40% of adults hold a bachelor's degree or higher (US Census). Since not everyone who attended the lectures filled out the survey, this information is not a completely accurate representation of who attended the events. However, this data does indicate that Burlington Geographic appealed to and / or was advertised to individuals with higher levels of educational attainment.

The people who attended the lectures came from several different occupational fields. These fields included business, medicine, education, student, trade, academic research, government, media, caregiver, retired, and religion. The most common occupational field listed was the business field, which consisted of attorneys, accountants, managers, business owners, marketing consultants, etc (29.3%). Besides this, the majority of the other respondents were either students (20.4%), educators (16.3%), or retired (13.6%). Other occupational fields such as medicine (2.7%), trade (2%), academic research (4.1%), government (3.4%), media (1.4%), caregiver (5.4%), and religion (1.4%), were poorly represented in the survey. These results reveal that most of the respondents, roughly 80 percent, were students, educators, retirees, or people in the business sector, which might indicate that people in these occupation fields turned out at higher rates than people in the other occupational fields. In turn, these results might also imply that the content / topics of the lectures were more appealing to students, educators, retirees, and people in the business field, than they were to people in other

occupational fields. It could also be that the lecture format is familiar to people with higher education exposure. Or perhaps, the methods of advertising utilized by Burlington Geographic attracted more individuals from these specific occupational fields.

Of the 188 people at the Burlington Geographic lectures who filled out the surveys we administered, a total of 99 people had said they have and/or are doing some sort of volunteer work. There are various types of volunteer work that these people are participating in. Many are involved in some sort of environmental/nature related volunteer work that pertains to the biophysical world. For example, some of this environmental volunteering includes work with programs and organizations such as the Burlington Conservation Board, the Green Mountain Club, and the ECHO Aquarium. A number of volunteers also do work relating to food projects, education and issues such as community gardening, city market, and other volunteer work. Many noted that they do religious work with groups and institutions such as Unitarian Universalist Church, Ottavei Zedik Synagogue, NPA church, and other volunteer work involving religion affiliation. Another theme of the volunteer work these people had listed was social services/justice; organizations and volunteer work for this theme includes guardian ad litem, domestic violence, search and rescue, Vermont refugee resettlement program, among other related positions and organizations. Volunteers also noted they work at museums such as the Lake Champlain Maritime museum and the Shelburne Museum. Additionally, volunteers listed they do work with school boards. There were many other volunteer positions and organizations marked down, but they ranged quite a bit; some of these include Therapy Dogs of VT, Donate

Life Vermont New England, and Land Trust among others (see attached list of all volunteer positions/organizations people listed).

Comments and Suggestions from Evaluation Responses

Of the 188 people at the Burlington Geographic lectures who filled out the surveys we administered, a total of 75 people had made comments/suggestions of the Burlington Geographic lecture series. Many of these people were pleased and had a positive take on these lectures and often cited to the BG series to “keep it up”, “please continue”, among other positive comments. However, there were some common complaints and suggestions for these series. It was commonly noted the lectures were too long and people would leave early because it would be getting too late; these comments were mixed between being too long and too late. Other frequent complaints were of the lectures and speakers themselves; again, people for the most part were pleased with the content, but complained about how the speakers talked too fast, read from a script. Some wrote that the introduction and breaks were too long. People also complained about difficulty finding free and close parking.

There were many different suggestions for future lecture topics and format; some of the common ones included: Abenaki topics, Burlington’s development controversies, Burlington immigrant/refugee experience, history, outdoor recreation culture and history, and various lectures pertaining to biophysical matters such as landscape change in Vermont or Burlington’s response to climate change (see attached list for all suggestion for future lecture topics). What is inherent in some of the complaints and suggestions is that people were displeased in the

traditional lecture format of one-way information. Some people even suggested more interactive activities such as a ravine walk and edible plant and herb walks. Lastly, some people noted how they enjoyed and were looking forward to the RETN feature on the website as this would allow them to watch lectures they missed.

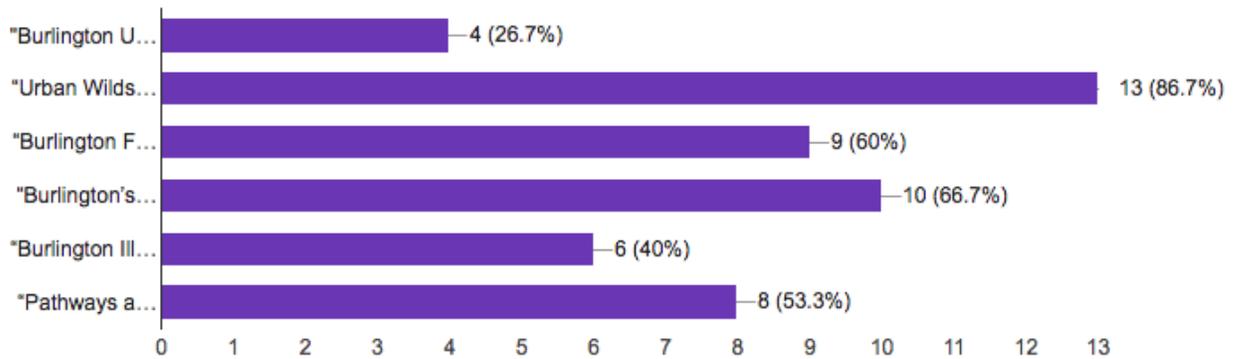
Findings from Burlington Geographic Attendee Follow Up Survey

After the Burlington Geographic lecture series was over and data had been collected, we compiled a follow up survey to send to the people who gave us emails on the initial survey. Out of about 30 emails, 15 responses were returned. Even though the return rate for the follow up survey was about half, the initial number of 30 is not nearly enough to make any assumptions about the attendees of the lecture series. Still, we offer the findings from the survey below.

Demographics

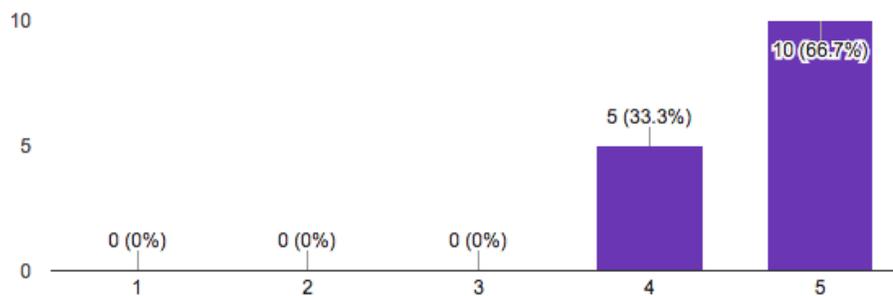
The majority of responders live in the South End neighborhood (6), are women (8) and are between the ages of 46 and 64 (7). Responses were received from people in all age categories, but the highest response rate was from people ages 46-64 years. Six respondents (the majority) attended two lectures. Four responders attended all six lectures. Two responders attended one lecture. One responder each attended three, four or five lectures. Thirteen respondents attended Urban Wilds of the Queen City (the highest attended). Ten responders attended Burlington's Edible History. Nine people attended Burlington Flowing and 8 people attended Pathways and Pavement. Six people attended Burlington Illuminated. Four people attended Burlington Underfoot.

Which BG lecture(s) did you attend? (15 responses)



The respondents gave the series high overall ratings: 10 said the series was very successful and five respondents gave it a pretty successful ranking (5 and 4, respectively, on the Likert scale of 1-5). The ratings were high overall with 10 responders marking a 5 (very successful) and 5 responders marking a 4 (pretty successful).

How would you rate the lecture series overall? (15 responses)



Influence to take action

Only one responder was not influenced by the series to take action in their community. Everyone else responded that they had been moved to some action as the result of attendance at one or more BG lectures. While some responses were not physically applied actions (like “just being more mindful and appreciative of the infrastructure around me”) others were concrete responses to lecture material (“trying out the foods on North Street”, visiting urban wilds, and joining the Master Naturalist program).

Outside the lecture

All responders reported that lecture material was brought up outside of the lecture. Some places where the topics were discussed included over the dinner table, in UVM classes, with friends and family with the intent of visiting urban wilds or other locations mentioned in the lectures or to encourage those friends and family to attend other lectures or watch the online, and in a board meeting. While the sample size is too small to declare an affirmation here, hopefully those who attended the lectures on a whole (not just the ones represented in the follow up survey) were discussing the lecture content in a variety of places, encouraging the spread of sense of place within Burlington communities.

Respondent Suggestions for Future Burlington Geographic Lectures

Respondents to the follow-up survey offered several topic suggestions including: aquatic life and watershed history for Lake Champlain, Abenaki history, agricultural geography, public

trail stewardship, creating “commons” property and more comparison within lectures between Burlington and other cities in Vermont were all suggested.

Other venues

A variety of alternative locations were also suggested. The ECHO Center, churches, elementary and middle schools, UVM and Champlain campuses, Ohavi Zedek synagogue, restaurants, and Union Station, as well as outdoor locations like a public park and Rock Point were recommended. Several responders commented that they liked Main Street Landing as a location.

Recommendations for events

The most common recommendation was for better advertising for the lectures. Responders also recommended reinventing the series with “community potlucks and ‘beach days’” because lectures “only bring a certain type of people and traditional advertising only reaches certain types of people.” Some suggested spreading out the series over the whole year, holding a longer Q and A section, and not having the lectures on religious holidays (like Yom Kippur).

RECOMMENDATIONS

After analyzing the responses from the participants of the Burlington Geographic lecture surveys, consulting with place-based education research, and participating in all of the lectures. we offer the following recommendations for future Burlington Geographic events. These

recommendations are grouped into suggestions for location and accessibility, length of event, topics, and types of event, with suggestions for ways to diversify audiences.

Location, Accessibility and Advertising

We suggest that future Burlington Geographic events be held in more diverse locations. These locations could include the North End, North Beach, and the South End. These locations could be based on accessibility and parking options. There is free public parking for two hours during weekdays in all city garages (Marketplace Municipal Garage, Macy's Municipal Garage, and College Street Municipal Garage), free parking on Sundays in all city garages (all three listed above plus Burlington Town Center garage), and free parking after 3pm and on weekends at the Jeffords Hall lot on UVM campus and the UVM Medical Center parking lots. With a wider variety of locations, it is possible that a more diverse audience will attend future Burlington Geographic events.

In terms of event outreach, a few additional venues are recommended. Advertising on public transportation, such as the CCTA bus system, may help attract crowds that may not necessarily be on college campuses, go to City Market, or read Seven Days and Front Porch Forum. Utilizing social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, could also reach people who may be interested in the material but may not go into Burlington that often. In addition, advertising at convenience stores or more general grocery markets such as Price Chopper, would be good marketing venues.

Event Time

It is difficult to find a time that fits around most people's work schedules, but one recommendation would be to schedule the event either an hour earlier, or to schedule the event to last for a shorter amount of time. Another idea is to provide food at every event, and possibly even sitter services for families who may not be able to leave their kids at home. This may increase the number of middle-aged attendees at Burlington Geographic events.

Event Topics

There was a wide variety of suggested topics that survey respondents gave for future Burlington Geographic events. These included:

- the cultural heritage of Burlingtonians,
- urban wildlife,
- winter transportation,
- Abenaki culture and history,
- aquatic ecology,
- Lake Champlain history,
- history of the Winooski River,
- climate change and Burlington,
- immigration history,
- religious history,
- history of outdoor recreation,

- history of Burlington architecture and development,
- music history,
- education in Burlington, and
- Burlington compared to other towns and compared to the nation.

These topics will help Burlington and greater Burlington residents gain a greater sense of place and knowledge about their community.

Event Types and Tailoring Presentations to Specific Groups

We considered how to reach more diverse audiences and interest groups throughout the course. We have three categories of suggestions: engaging activities, new venues, and tailored presentations.

Engaging activities and experiential learning

The first is that in addition to lectures, BG could offer interactive events. These would be either learning events where participants make or do something (such as manipulating artifacts, trying out the energy app on cell phones, tasting different foods, etc.), or they could be mobile events such as walks or “wheels”. This latter idea is to have a “walk” around parts of the city that must be done with wheels--bikes, wheelchairs, scooters, strollers--to show which areas are accessible to those using wheels, and which are not. Specific ideas:

Interactive moments at the lectures

- pair/share discussion activities
- food tastings

- manipulating and discussing objects
- trying out relevant apps
- games

Engaged learning activities

- crafts using local natural materials
- food preparation
- map making
- 'treasure hunt' walks (cultural, ecological, etc)
- wheeled events
- pub quizzes
- 'pop up' events

New Venues

Events could be held at a variety of locations at different times of the year. The Champlain Valley Fair, Church Street, Farmer's Markets, Fourth of July events, bars, Comedy Club, or American Legions could reach a wider demographic. A pop-up event on Church Street, or a kiosk in the Mall would allow for those who cannot attend formal events to still receive the information. Our literature review found that lectures may not be the best form of communicating with the general public, as it can be less engaging and less understandable than other forms of sharing information. If a lecture is held, it is recommended that the audience be

engaged in neighbor-to-neighbor conversation, group activities, or some form of embodied learning.

Tailored Presentations

A final suggestion is to partner with an organization and tailor a program to their area of interest. For example, BG could approach the American Legion or VFW leadership with the offer to do a historical presentation, or they could partner with Burlington Parks to do an evening presentation of the night sky, or the history of camping at the North Beach campground. Youth groups may be interested in the history of punk rock music in Burlington, and seniors might like to share their memories of Burlington teen life in the 1950s. Bar patrons might like a Burlington trivia game. To reach people other than those who already attend lectures as part of their daily lives, it will be necessary to go to new venues with tailored programming.

CONCLUSION

While the lecture series was successful as the first of its kind, it is clear that the program could benefit from changes, some of which we have highlighted in our research here. These recommendations will hopefully help with the future growth of Burlington Geographic outreach and its impact on place-based learning.