ABSTRACT

"SKILLED WORKERS ARE MADE HERE": HOW EDUCATION CHANGED BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY IN POSTWAR CONNERSVILLE, IN

by Christine Jordan Spaulding

Located in rural southeastern Indiana, the new Connersville High School and Whitewater Technical Career Center opened in September of 1969 with over 1,300 students enrolled from Fayette and surrounding counties. Connersville had provided vocational education courses to train students before 1969, but the Career Center proved to be a turning point in education, business, and the community, supplying local businesses with a new, trained workforce. Using Connersville as a case study, I argue that the relationship between education and business, particularly in a small-Midwestern industrial community, was often a reciprocal one in which each party influences and shapes the actions, decisions, and future of the other. By looking at advertising in The Connersville News-Examiner and hiring trends in businesses like Riedman Motors between the opening of the school in 1969 and 1980, I examine how the new program affected the economy, business, and community in Connersville after 1970. This paper concludes with a discussion of the methodology involved in creating a narrative website, including oral history and digital humanities, and a description of designing the website.

"SKILLED WORKERS ARE MADE HERE": HOW EDUCATION CHANGED BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY IN POSTWAR CONNERSVILLE, IN

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

by

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Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

2016

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This Thesis titled

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has been approved for publication by

The College of Arts and Science

and

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my project to my mother and father – for all their support and encouragement throughout this process – my brother and sister – for their advice and helpful hugs – and to the people of Connersville – without whom I would have no project and for their inspiration as they continue to hope for a brighter future.
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help of many faculty, staff, and graduate students at Miami University. A special thank you to Dr. Steven Conn for being my adviser, reading countless drafts, and assuaging my fears. Also to Dr. Kate Rousmaniere and Dr. Susan Spellman for serving on my committee and giving me helpful feedback, as well as Dr. Nishani Frazier and John Millard for their guidance and motivation to pursue a digital humanities project. And finally the graduate students in my cohort – thank you for your continual feedback, support, and camaraderie.
Introduction

Located in rural southeastern Indiana, the new Connersville High School and Whitewater Technical Career Center opened in September of 1969 with over 1,300 students enrolled from Fayette and surrounding counties. Connersville had provided vocational education courses to train students before 1969, but the Career Center proved to be a turning point in education, business, and the community, supplying local businesses with a new, trained workforce. Using Connersville as a case study, I argue that the relationship between education and business, particularly in a small-Midwestern industrial community, was often a reciprocal one in which each party influences and shapes the actions, decisions, and future of the other. By looking at advertising in *The Connersville News-Examiner* and hiring trends in businesses like Riedman Motors between the opening of the school in 1969 and 1980, I examine how the new program affected the economy, business, and community in Connersville after 1970. This paper concludes with a discussion of the methodology involved in creating a narrative website, including oral history and digital humanities, and a description of designing the website.

Vocational and career education in Connersville followed a path much like the rest of the nation: the needs and desires of the School Board and surrounding community influenced the development of the school’s curriculum at the new high school. During the postwar period in Connersville, School Board members were prominent businessmen and local community members who had lived in Connersville for generations. The wide variety of programs the Board developed, including evening programs for adults, all advanced different aspects of the community or businesses in Connersville. Most importantly, Whitewater Technical Career Center provided local businesses with skilled future employees who had training for a specific vocation. These graduates were able to obtain jobs in Connersville and remain a part of the local community for years to come.

However, as some industry began to leave Connersville in the 1980s and 1990s, the community changed. Beginning with American Kitchens and H.H. Robertson in the 1980s and ending most recently with Visteon’s departure in 2006, industry has contracted dramatically and reduced available employment. Although the number of enrolled students has continued to decline along with the overall population of Fayette County, Whitewater Technical Career Center continues to offer programs in a growing number of fields including cosmetology, health careers, technology, and early childhood education, demonstrating how education, while at times proactive, remains responsive to the changing community around it.

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“The Cornfield That Grew A Great Industrial Idea”

Industry shaped Connersville in the first half of the twentieth century, leading to an economic boom in the 1950s and 60s when production shifted to consumer products. A background of this industrial influence in Connersville is necessary to understand the context of the opening of the vocational school in 1969, as industry was the driving force in growing Connersville’s community.

Beginning as a trading post in 1808, Connersville slowly grew in the 19th century with the help of people and industries, as well as the construction of the Whitewater Canal. The advent of the canal provided an important outlet and market for supplies and helped to answer the economic problems of locals in the area by attracting businesses and industry to the town. Willing labor, low wages, and a community surrounded by industry made Connersville a desirable place for industry to grow.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Fayette County was home to 13,495 people – half of whom lived in the city of Connersville. The city had a strong industrial-business base with eight or ten major industries, almost entirely locally owned, plus 15 or 20 smaller manufacturing companies creating a variety of products. During World War I, industrial plants, such as Lexington, Rex, and McFarlan - which produced automobiles – Roots – which produced industrial sized blowers - and Stant – which manufactured parts for buggies and automobiles - added war contracts to their regular production. Although the community struggled during the Great Depression, Connersville was not hit as hard as other local communities; Auburn kept producing automobiles, while Roots and Rex continued doing limited business by cutting back on their staff of hundreds and restricting hours of production.

It took the coming of the Second World War to end the depression in Connersville. Stant, American Kitchens, H&H Robertson, and others converted to military manufacturing, picking up government projects until the end of the war. The increase in spending and jobs in Connersville continued to shape the city for the next few decades. Pay increased and the number of jobs grew in the post-war period. Charlie Hughes recalled the 1950s and 1960s in Connersville as the “boom.”

I think that the 50s and the 60s were the boom time in Connersville because all the factories were working, they hired everybody, in fact they would put ads in newspapers in Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan and they would bring busloads of them in from various other places and the factories would hire ‘em because you got a lot of good ones, you got a lot of bad ones and you eventually weeded out most of the bad ones.4

Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, the Connersville Chamber of Commerce hosted a number of industrial tours. Advertised in the Connersville News-Examiner, these tours brought industrialists from throughout the United States to Connersville to show them the resources available: schools, land, labor, transportation, and communication.5 These efforts proved to be successful at the time. The 1950s and 1960s were some of the most prosperous for the city of Connersville and Fayette County as a whole.

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4 Charles Hughes interview.
As Charlie Hughes noted, industries and companies reached out to areas beyond Connersville to fill their demand for labor, which Connersville’s population was too small to satisfy at the time. From 1940 to 1960, the population of Connersville grew from 12,898 to 17,698, increasing the share of the city’s population to 72% of the county’s total population, whereas in the decades before 1940, the city had been on average 60% of Fayette County’s population. The influx of workers in the decades leading up to the opening of the school emphasized the need for the community to prepare future generations with skills necessary to work in Connersville; developing a skilled and growing workforce was attractive to potential investors.

In 1965, in an attempt to fill this growing need for workers, the community in Connersville passed a bill to open a technical career school along with a new high school. Dedicated and opened to students in 1969, this new school structure demonstrates the industrial, business focus of the community and the impact of local companies on policy.

**Vocational Education in Connersville**

Historians of education who have examined the history of vocational training have focused primarily on urban settings, leaving rural communities out of their analysis. Connersville provides a middle ground -- an instance where both urban and rural meet -- to examine vocational education. The city’s location in southeastern Indiana, a predominantly rural part of the state, and the fact its student population pulled from areas outside of the city, combined with its emphasis on industrial economy create a community where both rural and urban interests intersect. While the opening of a vocational school and the growth of the program did not differ from the norm on a national level, Connersville provides a case study of the influence local business has on vocational education, and the way education, in turn, has an impact on local businesses.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Connersville had six elementary schools, a junior high school, and high school, as well as a parochial school associated with St. Gabriel’s Cathedral. The public schools also continued the national and state trend of inserting manual training courses into the curriculum, with courses in woodwork, business, and basic mechanics available. Some of the biggest changes to Connersville’s education system came in the 1960s and 1970s during the community’s boom: industry and corporation owners lived in Connersville and wanted to see the school and town progress. The programs at the new school provided skills that were applicable to future work in town.

Connersville’s senior high school before 1969 was located in the heart of the city, right off of Grand Avenue. Built in 1924, it was an ornate and imposing structure; the only building nearby that rivaled it in size was the hospital, which was built in 1950. Located in a predominantly residential part of the city, the senior high school served as a nucleus for activity - students could walk to and from school easily. The Spartan Bowl (the name of the basketball court that descends into the ground with impressive amounts of seating) was where everyone

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6 Manual training in education has been a topic of research for decades, though it has been discussed less frequently since the beginning of the twenty-first century. One concern when writing about vocational education are the changes in terminology over the years. Although they mean different things, manual training, vocational, technical, distributive, industrial, and career education have come to mean similar things to the general public. These terms have changed along with the public education system in which they are located and each represent a period or type of educational program that the public generalizes as “vocational education.”
congregated for basketball games on the weekends. Community members used the facilities in the evenings for their own programs.

But by 1965, the school was not fitting the needs of its students. Although there were a number of problems, the most prominent was overcrowding. Articles in the school newspaper, The Clarion, such as “Walk Defensively,” and also in the Connersville News-Examiner like “Crowded Conditions at Senior High School Are City’s Foremost Problem,” highlighted the need for new school facilities as classrooms were too full, hallways were packed, and simply getting to class proved to be a hassle. Architects were engaged, and a 124-acre lot was purchased in 1966; educators and administrators worked together with an educational consultant to develop specifications for educational programs, which were interpreted in preliminary building plans that were approved in 1967. The ground-breaking ceremonies followed in April of 1968.

The composition of the School Board, who helped to determine the funding and support for the new building, testify to the influence that local business interests had on the education system. Of the ten members sitting on the School Board between 1964 and 1974, five were bankers, two were industry owners in town, one was a former deputy sheriff, and two were local men, including a farmer, who had lived in the area their whole lives. Many local interests, including those of the men and one woman on the School Board, were represented and supported by the programs at the new school.

Educators, administrators, and architects all believed that the new design was beneficial to students and their education: they would learn more, grow personally, and the school would continue to do its job teaching children moral values as well as educate them to do their duty to the surrounding community. This mission was articulated in the dedication for the opening of the new school:

The edifice is dedicated to the betterment of mankind, now and in the future. May this be an instrument in the search for true understanding between all ages, all races, all religions, and all beliefs.

May it also serve as a catalyst to search for the ways of peace between all peoples.

May the persons who pass through this school, learn of their heritage and their responsibility to make a greater America.

Students, on the other hand, did not think of their new school in these terms. It was cold and unsociable in comparison to their old location.

Pam Taylor was one of the first students to attend classes at the new school complex. Rather than being a single building for students to navigate through, the new complex contained

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8 See also Marvin Lazerson and W. Norton Grubb, American Education and Vocationalism: A Documentary History, 1870-1970 (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1974), 50. After the Second World War, schools remained fixed in a model of education developed nearly fifty years earlier to suit the needs of a newly industrialized society, not a demobilized, postwar America. School board members in the 1960s were most often the proprietors of stores, bank officials, professionals, or managers. As Lazerson and Grub argue, during this period “[t]he ideal school system had come to be modeled after the modern corporation, both in its hierarchical and bureaucratic organization and in its purpose; students were raw materials to be processed in an efficiently run plant, and the criterion of success was the price the finished product could bring in the marketplace.” The impact of progressivism revealed the extent to which American education had accepted the ethics of the emerging corporate order in the first half of the twentieth century, which aided vocationalism as time progressed.
a number of different buildings that students have to walk between, each named after a different

townships in Fayette County, that introduced students to what it would be like walking and going

to classes on a college campus. The library is in a different building from the cafeteria,

which is in a different building from music classes, and so on. Moved to the new school as a

senior, she and her classmates missed the old high school; they felt that the new school grounds

were too spread out, making it hard to see anyone between classes and causing her to get cold on

her walk between the buildings in the complex.

As a student in the technical school, Pam would spend half a day in each school, splitting

her time between her regular, academic classes and her vocational work in secretarial courses. The

secretarial training gave students mock offices that each set up to their own taste where they

would learn shorthand dictation and typing. Although courses were offered to any students who

were interested, Pam recalled only females being in her secretarial classes and shop was filled

with entirely male students.

Cosmetology courses, unlike the clerical and secretarial courses that could potentially be

taken by either boys or girls, were only offered to women. The courses prepared girls for the

State Board of Beauty Culture examination and for their future jobs as beauticians. While the

women had cosmetology, the men had auto-body classes, agri-mechanics, and electrical systems.

These courses gave boys the experience of working with cars and taught them a variety of skills -

- from metal refinishing and framework to the mechanical parts of cars and farm machinery. The

vocational school also offered courses in electronics, appliance repair, drafting and building trades, and welding.

Don Brown graduated nearly ten years after Pam did, in 1981, but there had only been a

few changes to the makeup of the classes. Don, who had taken a woodshop class in seventh

grade and loved drafting program, wanted to become a draftsman. He was accepted to the two

year drafting and building trades course at the technical school. Don remembered at least a few

girls in his drafting class - one in each year of the program. Since the program was small, both

the first and second year drafting students were in the same classroom. The teacher would

introduce a concept to one half of the class, leave them to work, and then work with the other

half while the first worked independently. Drafting was at least becoming inclusive to both

genders - even if at a slow rate - but other courses continued to remain divided.

Although graduates reflected on the gender makeup of their courses, yearbooks and

images from the vocational school can tell a story of their own. There is a concept in the history

of education called the “hidden curriculum,” which refers to the socialization that takes place in

school but is not written into the formal curriculum. The hidden curriculum is composed of three

distinct functions: 1) the concept of socialization essential to social life - reproducing the

10 The Vocational Education Act of 1963 attempted to redirect vocational training by broadening its scope and

flexibility and by focusing on the economically and educationally disadvantaged. Following the Vocational

Education Act, however, there was some shift away from vocational education toward career education. Career

education, unlike vocational education, called for the “reorganization of schooling so that it would bear directly and

specifically on the student’s planned career,” which would teach job skills, as well as an emphasis on classes in the

basic subject areas, like math, science, language arts, and social studies. Career education is one example of

adapting the future generations to the growing industrial economy and America’s changing population for an

evolving, new society. Lazerson and Grubb, American Education and Vocationalism, 46.


12 For a history of women’s vocational training in education, see John L.Rury, Education and Women’s Work:

Female Schooling and the Division of Labor in Urban America, 1870-1930 (Albany: State University of New York


connections to civil society that transform the children into social being able to live and work together, form social institutions, and agreed upon meanings; 2) a sense of control wherein education in general and the everyday meanings of the curriculum in particular were seen as essential to the preserving of the existing social privilege, interests, and knowledge of some elements of the population at the expense of the less powerful groups; and 3) the direct production of ideological belief systems.¹⁴

Photographs, including those in yearbooks, the school newspaper, or others, present their own historical record of certain elements of the hidden curriculum - including societal expectations of gender that manifest in education. The distinct representation of males in technical classes and women in clerical and cosmetology courses in yearbook photos throughout a few of the earliest years of the vocational program (1971-1973) demonstrate how school continued to function as the guardian of the general sexual division of labor in society.

While these wide variety of courses were available to male and female students, it is important to emphasize that all of the vocational classes that were offered in Connersville -- particularly courses like drafting, welding, and clerical work -- were connected to the types of jobs that were available in town at companies like Dresser Roots, H.H. Robertson, Philco-Ford, Stant, and many others. Students may have used their skills from school and taken them elsewhere, but many students, like Pam Taylor, remained in Connersville since they were trained for jobs that were already available to them in local corporations. Pam “always wanted to work in an office and there were many opportunities in town.”¹⁵ Her vocational training helped her to get a job immediately after graduation, by “putting it on [her] application. It was kind of new to the businesses around here and [the businesses] thought ‘Wow this is great. These are people that had some almost on the job training,’ so to say... it was highly respected and considered when [businesses] were choosing candidates.”¹⁶ Companies were enthusiastic about the opportunity to hire recent graduates with training to fill open positions.

Connersville’s local businesses and industries provided resources to the schools. For example, as part of her work at H.H. Robertson, Pam interacted with current high school students in a Junior Achievement Program. Sponsored by local businesses, high school students would operate mini-companies under the supervision of current employees. These projects would break down the groups of students into their own companies -- with a president, CEO, accountant, and “regular” employees -- that would be paid by the profits of their product. The businesses would supply resources to the students in order to develop and create their product and the best competed against others schools across the state.

Between vocational and technical classes mixed with their general education classes and the opportunities provided to students through organizations like Junior Achievement, students were exposed and encouraged early on to be thinking about how their education would shape their future in Connersville. Adult education classes at the vocational school, which included training in vocational fields, homemaking, business and agriculture, instructed adults in the community in the local trade. Business and education in Connersville were remarkably intertwined.

¹⁵ Pamela Taylor interview, March 25, 2015.
¹⁶ Pamela Taylor interview.
With its century of industry leading up to the opening of the vocational school, Connersville’s students and their families were constantly exposed to industrial factories and clerical work -- all of which became a course offered in the technical program. This exposure likely encouraged students to get involved in vocational training. Pam recalled that a number of factors influenced her choices in choosing the vocational track: “[The vocational program] was appealing to me because I had met the secretaries at my father’s office and they would always show you around and this is what I do and kind of explain things a little bit.”\(^\text{17}\) By providing vocational programs in fields available locally, Connersville encouraged students to grow up and stay in the community, like their family had before them. Although the aim of the program was to support the local economy, the success of the vocational school meant that a small percentage of graduates were recruited to larger cities in the region such as Cincinnati and Indianapolis.

The opening of the new high school complex on Western Hill in the fall of 1969 confirmed deep connections between education and the community in Connersville. If not for the connections between businesses and education, the new curriculum would not have been shaped in the way that it was -- in favor of business courses and instructional models that taught students for a specific trade. The fact that the school corporation secured a $2,000,000 federal grant for the construction of the vocational program demonstrates the community’s commitment to the growing labor force. However, the grant did also shape the school’s curriculum, which had to meet federal requirements to continue to receive funding.

Everything about the new high school was geared towards students moving on -- whether it was vocational courses pushing them toward a specific trade or the layout of the complex (being a number of different buildings that students have to walk between) that introduced students to what it would be like going between classes on a college campus. The new complex had students thinking about their future and what they would do beyond high school, but not necessarily beyond Connersville. Graduates of the new curriculum were prepared like no other class before for jobs but, more specifically, jobs that were available in Connersville. Distributive education classes placed students in sales jobs in town; boys from auto-shop were recruited by Stant, Ford, and Roots before graduation; Roots created a co-op program for students in the drafting courses; and cosmetology classes helped ladies pass the State Board of Beauty Culture examination so they were eligible for jobs upon graduation.

The students and school were not the only ones attentive to possible career opportunities after graduation. The Connersville Chamber of Commerce and the *Connersville News-Examiner* released a number of publications and job advertisements after the opening of the vocational school that addressed the increased trained labor force. These publications advocated for the labor force throughout the community. By looking at both advertisements -- those looking for labor and those looking to bring business -- we can see a fuller picture of what the community found attractive to both labor and owners about the new education system.

The Chamber of Commerce produced multiple publications, the first of which came in 1971, that lauded the new education buildings and their unique educational approach, writing that the “Connersville area has a unique educational system that equals or surpasses most urban area systems in programs, facilities, and effectiveness.”\(^\text{18}\) In addition, they argued that every “industry or commercial concern that does business in Connersville… finds that it can draw from an excellent labor pool. Some of the industries have trade-union affiliation, and all find that there

17 Pamela Taylor interview.
are plenty of skilled and semiskilled workers available. There are sufficient unskilled but trainable workers, too.”

Again in 1975, they insisted that “Connersville industries draw from a dependable labor pool. Skilled and semiskilled workers are available for a wide range of industrial specialties, and others can be trained in desired fields through the facilities of the Connersville Vocational School.”

These publications, created in order to attract new companies to the community, obviously spoke well of the community and the education system – that was their purpose. However, there must be some truth to their claims given the success of job retention in Connersville, the increasing number of people employed in the city, and the continuing growth of vocational education at the high school. Between the 1950 and 1960 census, the civilian labor force increased by 1,000 even as the percentage of the population that was employed remained at 95%. These statistics remain consistent through the 1980 census.

The vocational school was emphasized whenever the community discussed education. Though still a part of the high school, the vocational school was largely considered a separate entity by businesses. In comparison to the high school curriculum, the language of the vocational education program emphasized the marketability of both the program and its students, even emphasizing monetary benefits to the businesses, saying that the Indiana Vocational Technical College is open to all persons 16 years or older and was created to provide quality training opportunities at the lowest possible cost. Part of the attraction of the vocational school to businesses was the cost – if they would not have to train their employees once they joined the labor force, it would save them money.

In addition, the Chamber of Commerce publications treat education as though it was a business. The Chamber calls the School Board “progressive” and argues “its schools are pacesetters in education and that cultural and recreational opportunities abound throughout the region.”

The publications also discuss the new school as though it were an industry: “Physical-plant improvement is a constant goal, resulting recently in an ultramodern, college-like high school complex; a broad-ranging, sophisticated vocational school; and additional regular and special-purpose classrooms for the 10 elementary schools.”

This type of rhetoric regarding education in Connersville highlights how business in both language and form has continually shaped American schools throughout the twentieth century.

Outside evaluation concurrent with the opening of the school supports the Chamber of Commerce’s conclusions. In May of 1969, Huff-Neidigh and Associates of South Bend, Indiana, published a Comprehensive Area Plan for Fayette County that “sets forth the inventory and analysis of population, economy, use of land, traffic, and community facilities and utilities.” The document established a current evaluation of Connersville and Fayette County as well as

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21 United States Bureau of the Census, *Connersville, Indiana*, “A Healthy Diversity,” 1975, 20. Persons who are of fourteen years of age or older are considered potential members of the labor force according to the U.S. Census definition. 54.2% of Connersville’s total population was classified as labor force in the 1960 Census.
22 For Connersville’s total population numbers from 1900 to 2010, see http://www.stats.indiana.edu/population/PopTotals/historic_counts_cities.asp
articulating a six-year and twenty-year city and county plan for continuing prosperity. However, key to my argument is the analysis of industry attraction and retention:

Industry is attracted to readily accessible land, adequate expansion potential, transportation facilities, water supply, moderate taxes, and, to a lesser extent, labor force availability in the regional area. Industries are increasingly seeking new plant locations removed from the problems of the nation’s larger urban centers. Comparatively recent industrial growth in Connersville supports this trend. Public attitude or policy toward future industrial growth is an important consideration...The policy inherent in establishing vocational training at the new Fayette County High School and the industrial attraction activities of the Connersville Chamber of Commerce reflect a positive labor retention policy.26

In a community analysis, written while the new vocational school was under construction, an outside firm determined that the vocational training reflected a positive labor retention policy, arguing that the vocational program was a benefit to both the industries – that would have a labor force – and the community – who would continue to attract business.

By 1981, nearly 10 years after the creation of the vocational school and when Don Brown graduated from the drafting program, the Connersville Area Vocational School had established strong connections with the local labor market: Roots had set in place a co-op program to train and ultimately hire top graduates from the drafting program, which he was a part of; the best students in auto-body and machine shop were being head-hunted by top firms from Cincinnati and Indianapolis; and John Brown noted the influx of graduates to the shop at Roots after its opening throughout his tenure there until 2003.27 Even as some companies closed and others were bought out by national interests, graduates of the program flooded shop floors, office spaces, and local sales positions from its first graduating class in 1970 until companies left, technology changed, or – in some cases – the employers found the students be unprepared for their jobs. Influences on both the local and national level played a role in the diminishing job market in Connersville.

Deindustrialization has hit Connersville in similar ways to other cities throughout the Rust Belt since the 1970s. Industry has relocated itself to other areas of the United States or simply out of the United States altogether since 1980. Since then, the community has shifted as the city’s population has slowly declined to around 13,000. In recent years, there have been efforts by local leadership to attract new industry to the area.

Craig Howell, who is the current Chairman of the Board for Economic Development, discussed work being done in Fayette County and in conjunction with the surrounding counties to bring work to the area as a whole; rather than competing against each other for new business, they work together to appeal to companies based on the amenities and goods that can be provided in each county. Only the community that is the “best fit” for a potential company will reach out to potential investors instead of competing against each other for business, which in the end benefits all surrounding counties with new jobs and economic development.28

26 Comprehensive Plan for Fayette County, 149-150.
27 Don and John Brown, Oral History interview, March 7, 2016. John worked at Roots for 44 years, starting in the fall after his high school graduation in 1959. Don also began working at Roots immediately after high school in 1981 and continues to be employed there today.
It has been almost fifty years since the new high school and vocational program opened in the fall of 1969 just out of town on Western Hill; fifty years of students taking general education classes before going to college, participating in the Majorettes, winning state basketball championships, and marching in the first ever high school marching band; fifty years of students learning a trade in hopes of getting a job at a local business, a fact which was more easily achieved before the turn of the twenty-first century. The Whitewater Technical Career Center’s presence in the community, however, was not enough to fight what was and is happening in the local economy.

As Don and John Brown noted, until the late 1990s, students were being hand-picked from the career center by local businesses, interviewing for co-op programs, and being hired immediately after graduation.²⁹ The school was doing what it advertised: putting students in a career they chose in school. But with company downsizing, shifts in industrial technology toward automated systems and computer programs, and changing education standards due to No Child Left Behind and other education acts in the late twentieth century, students did not appear as prepared for jobs, even when jobs were available to them in Connersville or surrounding counties. Craig Howell mentioned how the current director of the career center is working to improve classroom standards and the skills students are graduating with, but change comes slowly.³⁰ Funding remains a driving force of change since the school must first meet national and state standards before attempting to make changes to the curriculum. While local interests were able to shape the curriculum more to their liking when the school opened in 1969, shifting forces at a higher level make educational change difficult today.

Despite difficulties, the technical school still serves the local high school students and adults in the community, as well as bringing in students from five surrounding counties. Whitewater Technical Career Center continues to offer programs in a growing number of fields including cosmetology, health careers, technology, and early childhood education; the developing curriculum, while restricted some by uncontrollable economic and political factors, demonstrates how education, while at times proactive, remains responsive to the changing community around it.

²⁹ Don and John Brown interview.
³⁰ Craig Howell interview.
Historiography

This project engages the history of vocational education and deindustrialization in the Midwest. While the two fields have not directly converged as of yet, the influence of business on education and the impact of deindustrialization on business and community in the Midwest both shape the context and significance of my argument. Both fields have utilized case studies of small communities to approach their arguments, which I use in my own project as I find them to be persuasive and useful for making a distinctive argument that can apply to broader trends.

Beginning with the history of education in Lawrence Cremin’s *The Transformation of the School*, progressivism in education and the way scholars research and study education has changed. While educational historians have focused on the influence of industry on education in the past, scholars rarely address the reciprocal relationship between industry and education. I argue, however, that there is a relationship between these two aspects of society that needs to be recognized and discussed, one that has been left out of the scholarship.

The earliest works on vocational education primarily present the history of vocationalism, which came to be known as education that prepares students for a particular trade, rather than asking questions and theorizing about the practice of vocational education. These chronological histories investigate the origins of vocational education in America and argue that vocational courses have changed the function of American secondary schools over the years since 1876.

Starting in the middle of the 1980s, vocational education scholars concentrated on how the American education system was structured to prepare young Americans for the workforce. These discussions deal with the concept of vocationalism and provide case study examples of vocational education in cities throughout the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many case studies argue that a particular school system demonstrated the success or failure of a particular national trend or an exception to the rule. The case study provides a venue for the scholar to address and interpret broad, national trends in vocational education.

Near the end of the twentieth century, historians analyzed the evolution of vocational education over time as they reflected back over the last one hundred years of education in the United States. Scholars such as Denise Gelberg argue that the business community’s theories and processes were imported into schools during periods of social upheaval to produce an employable workforce. Others, like Herbert M. Kliebard, argue that Americans increasingly

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34 While the history of vocational education is important to understanding the mentality of the community in Connersville, the century of change does not need to be restated in this work. For a case study approach to the topic, see Harvey A. Kantor, *Learning to Earn: School, Work, and Vocational Reform in California, 1880-1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) or Ronald D. Cohen, *Children of the Mill: Schooling and Society in Gary, Indiana, 1906-1960* (London: Routledge, 2002).

turned to public schools and vocational education for answers to the problems of an increasingly urban, industrial society by changing the public school curriculum. Nevertheless, scholars only examined the impact of business on education.

My research in Connersville provides an example for future investigations into vocational education around the United States (particularly the Midwest) in the second half of the twentieth century by addressing the outcomes of such programs. In the forty years of research into vocational education, no historian or educator has looked at the impact that vocational education may have had on the surrounding community. Though schools tend to be more reactive than proactive in their responses to society, their graduates do have the opportunity to leave school and transform the society around them. What's more, since the decrease in vocational education history at the turn of the twenty-first century, historians have missed the opportunity to investigate the influences of early deindustrialization on vocational education.

Any discussion of the Midwest, including education, must include a dialogue with industrialization and deindustrialization. In the last three decades, historians have approached deindustrialization in the Rust Belt through studies of individual or comparative communities. Like case studies in vocational education, scholars of deindustrialization provide particular examples, typically one city or state, as a lens to investigate deindustrialization that are then used to address broader trends throughout the Rust Belt. The conversation began with urban areas, but scholars have shifted their focus of deindustrialization to the smaller, more focused cases found in small towns. Some authors like Richard Davies argue that loss of jobs, lack of vision, and urbanization are catalysts for small town decline everywhere in the United States. Others argue that, while the Midwest has undergone social transformations in the last half-century, small towns have proven to be resilient in the face of social and economic hardships.

Connersville, Indiana provides another case study of deindustrialization that will address the decline and resilience of a small Midwestern town. However, most scholars fail to address the impact that deindustrialization has on education. This project differs from previous research in its exploration of the effects of deindustrialization on career education and its outcomes on


38 Richard O. Davies, Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998). Other examples include: Jon C. Teaford, Cities of the Heartland: The Rise and Fall of the Industrial Midwest (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); David Plowden, Small Town America (New York: Henry N. Adams, 1994); or Catherine McNicol Stock, Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

businesses and the community. Career education in Connersville was driven by the growth of industry in the postwar period and, despite the effects of deindustrialization on the community in the 1980s, continued to develop and adapt their programs in response to the changing environment that remain to this day.
Methodology

Oral History

The issue of sources likely limited past research into the outcomes of vocational education. Early twentieth century schools, which have been the focus of vocational education histories, did not keep detailed records of their graduates’ careers or where they may have ended up after leaving school. Historians and scholars may not previously have made connections between vocational programs and their outcomes because they simply did not have the sources available. However, the Whitewater Technical Career Center, which remains active to this day, has graduates over the past forty-five years who have remained in Connersville. Oral history interviews with graduates, local businessmen and industry owners, and community members who have lived in Connersville over the past few decades allow me to access information that may not typically be recorded.

Despite some restrictions, oral history provides the best method for my research because it provides the perspective of the workers and locals of Connersville whose voice may not have been heard in the past. Interviews expand the intended audience, as individuals become active members in recreating the history, and are useful as a historical research tool. Oral history also helps us understand how individuals and communities experienced the forces and changes of history by carrying us into the historical experience at a personal level. There are interviews with prominent members of Connersville, such as business owners like the Riedmans, who have owned a car dealership in Connersville for nearly 90 years, or educational leaders like Bob Hoffman, the head of the vocational school in the 1970s, or Carl Hylton, the high school principal in the 1970s. Interviewees are chosen based on their position in Connersville in the 1970s and 80s, their association with the school or businesses, or for their connection to the history of the city in the twentieth century. The contrasting interview subjects attempt to provide a counter-perspective by highlighting the experiences of workers, students, and teachers and those of prominent members.

Despite decades of debate and discussion, oral history theory and methodology is little closer to becoming standardized. However, this does not make oral history theory inapplicable to scholarly historical research. The ability of oral history to provide new and accurate insights into the lives and understandings of ordinary people in the past depends on a critical approach to oral evidence and to the process of interviewing. Although most traditional historians consider oral history to be only a methodology, work by prominent oral historians over the past few decades have determined and outlined an oral history theory and general practice that can be applied to historical questions and research with more confidence and significance.

The revival of interest in oral history from the 1960s onwards was not well received by conventional historians, who regarded oral testimonies as unreliable and tainted by personal subjectivity. Until the 1970s, historians approached oral testimonies in much the same way as documentary sources, but establishing the empirical legitimacy of oral testimonies among professional historians remained elusive. The first distinguishing factor of oral history for Alessandro Portelli is its form: “tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing… which cannot be represented objectively in the transcript, but only approximately described in the transcriber’s own words.”40 By abolishing the form of oral history, normally by transcription, we flatten the

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emotional content of speech down to the supposed equanimity and objectivity of the written document.

The second thing that makes oral history different, according to Portelli, is that it “tells us less about events than about their meaning.”41 This does not imply the oral history has no factual validity, but that the only problem posed by oral sources is that of verification: “What informants believe is indeed a historical fact (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened.”42 The importance of oral sources, therefore, is its departure from fact, rather than its adherence to it. Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria that are required by all types of sources anyway, the diversity of oral history remains in the fact that the ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and that this truth may be as equally important as factually reliable accounts. The nature of culture and society in oral history, despite its distance from the events, allows oral testimonies to be active in creating meanings, whereas writing and documentary sources are inactive, as written documents are fixed.

While much of the early revival of oral history focused on the testimonies of repressed or silenced groups, more recent works have begun a transition toward applying oral history theory to local community research. Linda Shopes urges researchers to immerse themselves in the interviews so that they can begin to uncover patterns and develop social or historical generalizations. Shopes states: “a body of interviews, thoughtfully considered, can open up an understanding of the local culture, those underlying beliefs and habits of mind, those artifacts of memory that propel individual lives, give coherence to individual stories, and perhaps extend outward to a larger significance.”43 By understanding the local culture and their beliefs, historians can move toward a larger, historical significance to their research.

Even though there have been steps toward determining a theory for oral history, there are questions that remain unanswered, and new topics and interviews only bring up new questions, such as issues of empathy and questions of power to name a few, which creates problems in determining a method that works for all testimonies and situations. As it has grown and utilized theory and methodology from other disciplines, oral history has continued to expand on historical theory to provide a new method of research for historians. Oral history has transformed both the content of history – by shaping the focus and opening new areas of enquiry, by challenging some of the assumption and accepted judgments of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored – and the processes of writing history by breaking down the walls between academia and the public.

Digital Humanities

Even less well defined than oral history theory is the field of digital humanities. Given its young state as an academic field and the constantly advancing state of technology, digital humanities scholarship faces a number of critiques. From leaving out authors and their work that remains under copyright to neglecting the needs of people with disabilities, from gaps in modes of inquiry, particularly on topics like race and gender, to the usability of the field, the digital humanities remains a highly contested and evolving area of study.

With the numerous academic monographs on digital humanities, and not including the majority of the digital scholarship on the web, pinning down the digital humanities is no small

41 Ibid, 36.
42 Ibid, 36.
In his critique of the field, Mark Sample writes that, though it is risky to generalize about digital humanities, “…it is safe to say that the work of the digital humanities is ultimately premised upon a simple, practical face: it requires a digital object, either a born-digital object or an analog object that has been somehow scanned, photographed, mapped, or modeled into a digital environment.”

There is hardly a set definition of what digital humanities might be; it can mean a variety of things to different people depending on the work that they do within the field. However, this difficulty should not be a discouragement to those wishing to enter the field. Because of the vast variety of scholarship and tools available, the digital humanities can be a useful – though at times daunting – tool for historians and other academics alike.

Maybe because we use it in everyday life and we consider it to be mundane or of little significance, social media remains largely unstudied within academia. Although it is rarely studied, social media should not be dismissed as trivial to the digital humanities. As Claire Ross argues in her chapter on social media and the digital humanities: “Because of the ease of use, social media offers the opportunity for powerful information sharing, collaboration, participation, and community engagement.” Rather than rebuff social media for its ease, it should be embraced for its abilities for community engagement and participation, as well as its dissemination capabilities.

Social media is defined as “the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio. This interaction, and the manner in which information is presented, depends on the varied perspectives and ‘building’ of shared meaning, as people share their stories and understanding.” By building a shared meaning and interacting with information, social media practices are beginning to have a direct impact on scholarly dissemination: “new practices are emerging in informal, online based social communication spaces, outpacing development of practice within the formal modes of academic publishing.” Social media is used informally to facilitate opportunities for open exchange and presenting new ideas, which allows scholars to access research as it happens and participate in a dialogue about research practice.

However, some of the benefits of social media – the fact that it is collaborative and shared information – are problems with it as well. There is some fear that social media undermines the quality of public and academic discussion and debate. While adoption of social media is growing, there remains a need for these issues to be addressed in a systematic way. The widespread practicality and sustainability of social media as tools for research practice, scholarly communication, and public engagement in academic research remains to be determined.


Both oral history and digital humanities scholarship address the issue of information sharing, collaboration, participation, and community engagement in academic scholarship. While the digital humanities focuses on shared information within academia, oral history addresses issues of participation and community engagement in shaping memory. Portelli and Shopes each address the question of memory within the individual and the community. According to Portelli, “what informants believe is indeed a historical fact (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened” while Shopes argues that those historical facts, “those underlying beliefs and habits of mind, those artifacts of memory that propel individual lives, give coherence to individual stories, and perhaps extend outward to a larger significance.”

Historians, and other academics alike, are using social media to collaborate and participate in discussions of research and its practice. These two fields, oral history and digital humanities, come together in my project on vocational education in Connersville.

The Connersville community has influenced its own memory of the town in the 1960s and 70s. How their collective memory has been shaped over the last five decades says as much about the town’s history as it does about their memory. However, their collaborative and shared memory can continue to evolve through community engagement with the digital humanities and social media. My online narrative – including limited archive, short biographies of interviewees, videos, audio, and text – allows others to interact with the material in ways traditional research is unable to do. The ability to comment, post questions on the “About the Project” page, and visually interact with Connersville’s history allows members of communities both inside and outside Connersville to engage and participate with the shared memory.

Oral history is one distinct way to uncover the local culture and their beliefs and social media provides an outlet so we can move toward a larger, historical significance through collaboration.

Other Sources

In addition to using oral history interviews and adapting my research to digital humanities methods, traditional historical sources were also a large part of my research. Newspapers, like the Connersville News-Examiner – the daily local paper – and the Clarion – the student newspaper at Connersville High School – helped contextualize the information gleaned from interviews with outside sources. The Cohiscan, which is the high school yearbook, provided insight into how students viewed both the new school and the vocational program. Chamber of Commerce brochures published in the years immediately following the opening of the vocational school support conclusions about industry and education in the 1970s. Data from the Federal census provided population statistics to understand the demographics of the both the county and city.

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50 https://connersvillehistory.wordpress.com/about/.
Rather than writing a traditional thesis, I originally wanted to design a museum exhibit on industry and deindustrialization in Connersville, Indiana. When I discovered - thankfully early on in my research - that there was no space available at the university to exhibit my project, I quickly brainstormed a different way for me to present the history of Connersville that had been so captivating to me: a website. Unlike a static exhibit that is only available for a limited amount of time, a website could remain accessible for longer than a few months in the spring of my second year of graduate school and be more interactive for potential visitors.

Initially limited by funding, I searched for ways to design an engaging and interesting website without spending any money, which lead me to using WordPress. Even though it is traditionally used as a blogging site, WordPress has thousands of different webpage templates available for free, as well as a larger amount of storage space available for free to users. Rather than paying for a specific design, having to create my own from scratch, or pay for a domain name, I was able to use WordPress’s established and connected system to pick out a useful design for a webpage entirely my own.

In looking for a design, I aimed to utilize a template that was driven by visuals. My research had provided me with hundreds of images, hours of video and audio recordings, and the stories of the people of Connersville; I felt that boiling those emotions down to simple text would remove a significant part of their story. After putting up limited content on my website, I tried different types of themes to see which worked best for the type of content I wanted to publish; The “Museum Template” that I settled on had everything I wanted: an image-driven home screen, a color scheme that matched Connersville High School’s, simplicity in it’s scrollable posts, and the ability to have viewers interact with the narrative through images and videos in the text.

The next issue I faced in designing a public webpage was copyright. Though I found many images that I was interested in using online, many of them are restricted by copyright laws. Through cooperation with Historic Connersville, Inc. and others as well as legwork taking many images myself, I was able to compile a vast archive of images that I could use without issue of copyright. Choosing images to be representative of the narrative proved to be the next, although easier task, in creating an interactive website.

Many of my earliest decisions in designing and implementing this project came from outside forces – no exhibit space and no funding – however, once I began the process of creating the website, the decisions were entirely my own. The question of how to present a traditional, historical question in an interactive and public forum plagued my early drafts, but the final outcome achieved almost every goal that I had set out to reach. Besides technical difficulties that caused temporary standstills in my project, which is to be expected for any project so digitally focused, I found the process of creating a website to be enjoyable and fascinating.

For a description and outline of the website itself, see Appendix I.
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**SKILLED WORKERS ARE MADE HERE**

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**Connersville: Indiana’s Little Detroit**  
(History of Connersville up through WWII)

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**Cornfield That Grew An Industrial Idea**  
(Post-WWII History of Connersville)

**Welcome to the New CHS**  
(Story of building new complex and student reactions to new school)

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**A Unique Educational Approach**  
(Vocational education in Connersville)

**Gendered Expectations**  
(How gender impacted courses at vocational school)

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**Joining the Workforce**  
(How students successfully went from vocational education into the workforce)

**Competent Men, Diversified Industry**  
(Community/business responses to vocational training)

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**Boom, Bust, Exodus**  
(Deindustrialization in Connersville)

**Resistance & Rebuilding**  
(Current community efforts, industry that remains, and what the school looks like today)

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**Note**: Arrows represent a chronological, full story on the website. Each section can be read independently and does not rely on previous knowledge from other narratives. **