1. **Site:** Welch, WV (McDowell County, Central Appalachia)

2. **Description of partner:**
Reconnecting McDowell is a comprehensive, long-term initiative, organized by the American Federation of Teachers, whose purpose is to make educational improvement in McDowell County the route to a brighter economic future. Reconnecting McDowell has already assembled a coalition of partners from business, private foundations, government, nonprofit agencies and labor who are committed, in a signed covenant, to seek solutions to McDowell’s complex problems surrounding community redevelopment - poverty, underperforming schools, drug and alcohol abuse, housing shortages, limited medical services, economic diversification, and inadequate access to technology and transportation. Each partner has agreed to provide services, money, products and/or expertise to lift McDowell County’s schools, students and their families in a multi-dimensional, coordinated fashion.

3. **Social Issue:**
Anyone can find the disturbing health and socio-economic measures that are indicative of the issues that McDowell County faces when it comes to reinventing itself. Some of the major ones are:
- In 1965, the county boasted more than 120,000 people. Today, barely 22,000 Americans call McDowell County home.
- Almost half the residents receive some form of public assistance.
- Among West Virginia counties, McDowell consistently ranks at or near the bottom in measures of health, income, and education.
- McDowell County is the sixth poorest county in the nation.
- McDowell County leads the nation in the number of overdose deaths from narcotic pain medications.
- Five years in, Reconnecting McDowell’s efforts, in association with our major partnership with the McDowell County Board of Education, can begin to show a correlation between our efforts to address the constellation of outside factors that affect educational success through our community schools and Broader Horizons programs and significant improvements in public school testing scores, graduation rate, and college attendance.
In addition:

1. The successes that Reconnecting McDowell, and various organizations working in McDowell County, are not being translated in an easily appreciated way to the populace. That’s a failure of previous messaging strategies, the nature of the progress being, and a gulf between the aspirations of those who do/fund the work and those who stand to benefit from the work.

2. As a subset of the above-described gulf, the vision for economic diversification and redevelopment in McDowell County held by those doing work in these fields is not always congruent with the vision of the residents of the County. Since these two aspects are key to the success of work in many others, they deserve special consideration.

4. Impact of Project on Community:
Our retrospective self-assessment and strategy development project will largely impact the McDowell County community by making significant strides to bring the substantial outside energy and resources that are being focused on the community due to national attention and media narrative closer in line with the vision and energy of the County’s residents. A perennial source of conflict and impediment within the community is the perception that change is being “forced” onto the community, instead of being developed with it. This perception remains even in this era which recognizes stakeholder development/engagement and the differences between American rural and urban cultures. We think work done on trying to understand the particularities within the heart of an America that many struggle to relate to could yield dividends well beyond the borders of Southern West Virginia.

5. Research Project Description:
The Fellows work would be done in conjunction with the Partnerships Coordinator’s development of a report on the state of partner relationships and aspirations as well as a report being produced by an outside contractor focusing on a qualitative analysis of the populace’s perception of Reconnecting McDowell and its work.

The work undertaken by the Fellow would focus on collecting data produced by these other two efforts and developing/refining suggestions for best practices that would alleviate the above-described gulf between community actors and the residents within the community.

6. Methodology:
The Fellow would do preliminary review of the findings of the two above-described reports and then participate in a brainstorming process with the Reconnecting McDowell staff and the communications staff from Reconnecting
McDowell's Academic and Public Relations-oriented partners. The Fellow would then take the proposals from this committee and begin focus testing and refining them through a series of interviews and broader working relationships with community stakeholders. The Fellow would then produce a report of results of this refinement process and suggestions for further work.

7. **Student Profile:**
   Ideally, the student will have a background in qualitative research and communications strategies. A working knowledge of the basics of economic development and public health issues specific to rural America is also helpful.