

Students partner with Rust to Green to research Utica refugees



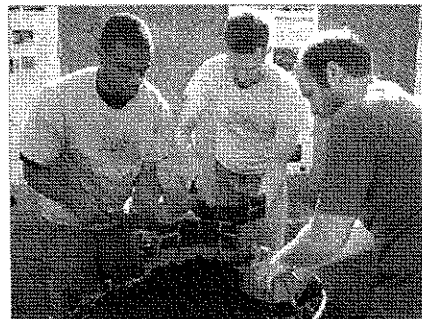
by Adam Fix '13
NEWS WRITER

While some perceive Utica's growing refugee population as a sign of the community's continual economic hardships, Professor of Sociology George Hobor sees them as a key resource for revitalizing the city.

On Dec. 14, the Levitt Center, working with Rust to Green, Utica, received a \$21,200 grant from the Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties, Inc. to study Utica's refugee population and its potential role in the future economic growth of the city.

Hobor, who is overseeing the project, hopes that the research project will "establish whether or not there is variation in economic performance between different refugee groups," and "elucidate the factors that allow some groups to be more successful than others."

Hobor aims to uncover how these various groups integrate, successfully or unsuccessfully, into society. This project is an example of a "LEADS," or Local Economic Alternative Development Strategy. These projects have proven effective in helping struggling cities all over the country reverse economic decline.



"There are clear indications that they have been successful in restoring decaying parts of the city through small, grassroots, entrepreneurial activities," said Hobor.

The main purpose of the research is twofold: to determine what made those efforts successful, and study how those successes relate to equality of opportunity of the various groups within the community. "By understanding why there may be variation in performance between groups," said Hobor, "we can make recommendations for how this variation can be addressed through public policy."

Hobor, who has studied the "Rust Belt" region, directs the research but has hired five Hamilton students to work on the project as an internship. David Schwartz '13 and Elly Field '13 will research this semester and the remaining three interns will begin the second half of the project over the summer. This grant will also allow Hamilton to work extensively with Cornell University, which received a similar grant under the Rust to Green program.

Overall, Hobor hopes that the research will illuminate "how [certain refugee groups] have succeeded and whether or not there are any obstacles to further success." Ideally, this project will help Utica transform its refugee population into the leaders in an economic recovery.

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The Economic Impact of Utica's Refugee Population

Rust to Green Group Studying Refugees as Assets for Economic Development

By Pat Dunn '12

Contact: Holly Foster 315-859-4068

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Utica's refugee population has often provided unique opportunities for Hamilton students interested in urban community research and outreach. This summer, Elly Field '13, Ryn Steck '12, Dave Schwartz '13 and Amy Dow '12 will be working with Visiting Assistant Professor of Sociology George Hobor on a research project examining local alternative economic development strategies (LEADS) in Utica. The grant was awarded to the Levitt Center, under the umbrella of Utica's Rust to Green initiative, from the Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties, Inc.

The project will focus on Utica's unique immigrant populations and examine how the diverse pockets of refugee residents function as assets for economic development. The students, under the guidance of Professor Hobor, have put together a questionnaire to be distributed among Utica's refugee population that asks respondents to identify the types of investments they have made in financial security. The project will seek to answer three main questions:

1. How have different groups of refugees become integrated into the Utica economy?

The Utica refugee population is a demographic diverse in socioeconomic status and ethnic origin. Utica has high populations of Bosnians, Vietnamese, Sudanese, Somali and Uzbek refugees, and some groups have a noticeably stronger socioeconomic foothold than others. The researchers have divided the sample population into two subsets: a pre-9/11 refugee group (Bosnians and Vietnamese) and a post-9/11 "newer" refugee group (Sudanese, Somali, and Uzbek). The students' questionnaire will ask respondents about the types of investments they have made in financial security during their time in Utica, and from this information the students will try to discern where refugees' differential economic trajectories begin to diverge.

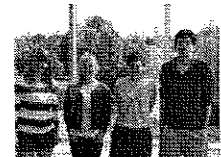
2. What are the factors that explain the different economic trajectories?

There are a lot of factors that may begin to explain the socioeconomic disparities among the different groups of refugees—human capital, language barriers, the amount of time individuals spent in refugee camps and their quality of life before coming to Utica. Researchers will be probing respondents to find out how they have utilized social networks and organizational infrastructure within Utica, as well as how they feel about organizations that are intended to help them.

3. Has the integration of refugees into the Utica economy had any spillover effects on the broader Utica area?

Utica represents an interesting economic case study because, contrary to dominant trends in other cities in the Northeast and Midwest, Utica's workforce is getting younger, and small pockets of entrepreneurship have generated localized growth. Research has shown that smaller forms of development may turn into resources for citywide revitalization. Hobor and his students will seek to illuminate whether the cost of the refugees in taxpayer dollars may be offset by contributions in entrepreneurship and small-scale development.

The researchers hope that the information yielded by this project will be useful for policy-makers and nonprofit organizations interested in the economic future of Utica. The project is focused on sustainable, local growth consistent with the Rust to



Elly Field '13, Kathryn Steck '12, Amy Dow '12, David Schwartz '13.

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Green initiative, and this project hopes to strengthen the Utica community "through the support and cultivation of durable economic institutions."

The grant was awarded in December, and work on the project began in earnest during the spring semester, with Schwarz and Field working with Professor Hobor on background literature checks and identification of clusters of refugees, per recent U.S. census data. The students are interested in this project because of their past involvements with Project SHINE and the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, and because of the project's relevance to sustainable development.

Ryn Steck is a graduate of Columbia High School in New Jersey. Dave Schwartz graduated from Trinity Prep School in Florida. Elly Field is a graduate of Valley Regional High School in Connecticut. Amy Dow graduated from Barrington High School in Rhode Island.

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