Tourism as a Solution for the Economic Revitalization of an American College Town
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Abstract: American college towns tend to be very economically dependent on the college they host. If enrollment is high, the town thrives. However, when enrollment is low, the town faces socio-economic difficulties, including increased unemployment and struggling businesses. Furthermore, the seasonal presence of students poses an additional challenge. This study investigates tourism as a potential solution to diversify college towns’ sources of revenue based on community willingness and town assets. Data were collected via interviews with 50 community members from three different groups within the town. While environmental tourism shows great potential for community self-development, the Calgary model of competitiveness highlights the need for significant efforts to establish the required support systems.

Keywords: college town; community self-development; environmental tourism; Calgary model; asset-based community development

1. Introduction

Seasonality is a consistent struggle tourism operators must overcome in order to stay in business. While this issue is common for tourism establishments, it is particularly challenging for a small college town where the fluctuations in population are so dramatic. Eastern Illinois University is located in the small town of Charleston, Illinois. This small rural community has an estimated 17,790 household residents, not including transient college students [1]. During the Fall semester of 2019, the university had a total of 7526 students enrolled. It is important to note that not all of these students reside in Charleston; some travel from other places, while others choose to complete their studies entirely online [2]. The university also plays a significant role in attracting tourists to the area by hosting large events, in addition to the economic contribution made by students via their regular spending throughout the fall and spring semesters.

In comparison to other US universities, EIU is considered to be a medium-sized university. Colleges like Williams College and Amherst College have roughly 2000 students and are considered to be small [3]. Mega universities, like Arizona State University with over 65,000 on-site students spread over multiple campuses, have at least 50,000 students [4]. However, the average student population size for US colleges is 6354 [5]. This can greatly depend on the state the university is in and how many colleges are able to serve that region. Figure 1 shows an overview of first-degree-seeking undergraduate student enrollment by state to highlight the vast differences overall depending on where the university is located.
EIU’s student body tends to be young adults, with a median age of around 22 years. Moreover, the student population is more ethnically diverse and has a higher representation of minority groups compared to the broader Charleston community. A significant portion of EIU students come from outside the local area, with 880 international students contributing to the cultural diversity of the town in the Fall 2023 semester [7]. In comparison, the racial makeup of the city is predominantly White, accounting for around 84% of the population, followed by African American residents comprising about 7.5% [8].

Illinois experienced economic difficulties due to the inability to approve a budget, which led to the loss of jobs throughout the state. EIU itself experienced a steady decrease in enrollment in the previous years before the budget crisis, which impacted the economic activity of the town and created a need to compensate for this loss of population. Moreover, the economic challenge intensifies when students leave for the summer and revenue generation declines. In order to assist with this issue, an analysis of the community is conducted in order to explore what kind of economic activity would be ideal for this
college town. The purpose of this study is to determine how the community can improve economically based on the current assets in the area.

An examination of community development in small towns in the United States revealed that sustained economic planning and growth strategies were more effective in stimulating economic activity compared to immediate, short-lived interventions [9]. Researchers have explored how the presence of recreational opportunities, beautiful natural landscapes, historical sites, or cultural heritage assets near a university campus, in proximity to a busy urban center, or close to a major highway impacts the local community. For instance, in Charleston, Illinois, the town benefits from its surrounding natural environments, nearby historic sites, and the presence of a college campus, despite being situated 8 miles away from the nearest interstate highway. In the quest to revitalize the economy, it is important to preserve the attributes that made the current community choose Charleston as a home. Moreover, Charleston holds a vision of “a culturally rich community, characterized by a safe environment, with active citizens, committed to excellent educational institutions, a growing and diverse tax base, and a collaborative local economy that provides opportunities for all citizens, residents, and visitors” [10]. As the community residents, students, and community officials appear to function independently of one another, a closer look at their perceptions of the town is needed to determine how they can collaborate and communicate with one another more efficiently. This involves determining if their views and perceptions of the town are in alignment with one another. Another unique aspect of this study is the focus on small, rural towns with a university. Previous studies on tourism development as a tool for economic growth have either focused on small communities or those that are in larger towns with a university. However, studies are limited that include both aspects. This study will investigate tourism as a solution for revitalizing the economic activity of the town with respect to the city vision, the city assets, and the community’s willingness.

Literature Review

In recent decades, small towns across the United States have faced various challenges, including economic decline, population loss, and limited resources for community development. To address these issues, scholars and policymakers have explored strategies that leverage local assets, such as natural beauty, historic sites, and cultural heritage, to stimulate economic growth and enhance community well-being. Recent tourism research emphasizes the importance of strategic planning and collaboration among stakeholders to harness tourism’s potential effectively [11–14]. Studies found that small towns that capitalized on their unique attractions, such as scenic landscapes, outdoor recreational activities, or cultural events, were able to increase their revenue through visitors to the area. Including locals in this process assists with reaping these benefits while ensuring that growth is sustainable, environmentally responsible, and socially contentious with respect to the community culture [15,16]. In turn, this assists with fostering a feeling of local ownership and socially bonded locals via community collaboration.

Small towns have been studied in a variety of ways related to community development. Particularly, those focused on using tourism as a tool to improve the economy have found a few key issues, such as dependency on the tourism industry. Dependency may occur because of limited development, lack of other industries in the area, or because it is able to generate more revenue quickly than other industries. For example, the Dominican Republic has grown its tourism industry rapidly in an effort to provide an alternative to agriculture and fishing in an attempt to rejuvenate its declining rural sector industry and alleviate poverty [17]. However, there is concern that a downturn in the economy, a natural disaster, or a lack of appeal of the destination may cause the area to suffer financially if this is the main source of revenue generated. While diversification of industries is ideal, it can be difficult to carry out with limited resources, which many small towns face. Environmental aspects might be one of the few assets of a town, which makes them an ideal resource for attracting tourists to an area. Small, tourism-dependent towns may have fewer entertainment options than bigger cities—which means downtown areas may offer
The only form of secondary entertainment apart from the main draw to the town [18]. The availability of natural areas tends to alleviate the burden of developing entertainment options in order to diversify the appeal of the area.

Small towns have been defined as having a range of 5000 to 20,000 inhabitants [19,20]. Depending on how tourism is developed in a small or rural town can determine whether or not it can provide more positive impacts than negatives. While tourism can help rural areas recover economically, the social and environmental pressure may cause more harm than good. To avoid this, it is advised that these areas avoid rapid expansion, as this can help to control socially sustainable development and allow the community to adapt to the disruption that tourism brings with it [21]. Small towns may have unique historical or cultural aspects they can use to draw tourism to the destination. Even so, the environmental resources of the areas can be considered the most valued by tourists [20].

Towns with a college have unique benefits and challenges compared to other towns. A strength of having a college town for the tourism industry is that there is a large recruiting pool to hire workers [22]. However, the main struggle with relying on students for employment is the high turnover rate [23]. Another issue is working around their class schedule, which may vary each semester [24]. Minimizing turnover not only saves time and money via hiring but also improves customer service by having well-trained staff instead of having new employees who are just learning and more prone to making mistakes [25]. However, hotels tend to have more dependable sources of lodging demand and are less at risk of going out of business compared to non-university towns [26].

The university itself can bring in tourism throughout the year, such as via sporting events, theater groups, art displays, conferences or research competitions, musical performances, or graduation ceremonies. However, small colleges may not have the same resources to be able to provide these attractions at a level to draw in large transient crowds, if they even host these activities at all.

Tourism and community development research have utilized asset-based community development in order to find areas of improvement and increase economic stability at the destination [27–29]. Asset-based community development is the idea of focusing on the success and positive aspects of the area while maintaining a sustainable approach to development [30]. This concept focuses on building and strengthening the assets of the community instead of concentrating on the needs or issues of the destination. Common community assets include culture, infrastructure, organizations, institutions, and the environment.

Environmental assets of a community are not only considered to be valuable for recreational opportunities and improved health of the residents but can be considered to be a significant factor in attracting tourists to a destination. This is particularly imperative for areas that may have very few resources for developing man-made tourist attractions. Being able to analyze a destination’s appeal and competitiveness, as well as providing a plan for protecting the assets of the community, is a fundamental aspect of proper destination management. This can be performed by utilizing the Calgary tourism competitiveness model [31], with an emphasis on analyzing the environmental appeal, management of resources, and evaluation process of tourism management implementation (Mihalič, 2000) [32]. This model focuses on five areas of a destination: (1) appeal, (2) management, (3) organization, (4) information, and (5) efficiency. Improving the quality of the destination by focusing on these factors can help to improve the destination’s image and assist in bringing in more tourists to the destination. This theory relies on long-term planning and avoiding short-term solutions, such as lowering the price of services at a destination to attract tourists.

Research has found that lowering the price for a lower quality destination is not a long-term viable solution to attract tourists to the destination, as the lower quality and lack of competitiveness would force the destination into the final stage of the destination life cycle: decline [32–34]. In addition, an unfavorable destination image is difficult to correct, as positive new information tends to be ignored once this impression is seeded in
the potential tourist’s mind [35]. Therefore, proper management of resources, particularly fragile environmental assets, should be prioritized in the management plan in order to maintain or improve the quality of the destination.

Community participation and engagement are critical factors in the success of tourism-based development initiatives, as they help to connect locals to the product offering and ensure tourists are engaged in an authentic experience. Grassroots involvement in decision-making processes revolving around residents contributing to the planning and implementation ensures tourism development aligns with local values, preserves community identity, and promotes social inclusivity [36,37]. Community involvement also allows for benefits to the tourists via authentic representation of the area, the preservation of traditions, and a more genuine experience in comparison to a commercialized tourism destination [38].

However, research has also highlighted the potential negative impacts of tourism on small-town communities, such as gentrification, environmental degradation, or cultural commodification [39,40]. Comprehensive planning and responsible management practices can be used to mitigate these risks if a focus is placed on balancing economic growth objectives with environmental conservation and social equity considerations to foster sustainable tourism development in small towns [41,42].

The role of digital technologies in promoting tourism and enhancing community engagement has also been explored. The use of digital platforms, such as social media, websites, and mobile applications, to market small towns as tourist destinations and facilitate visitor interactions has increasingly been used over the years [43,44]. By leveraging technology, small towns can expand their reach, attract diverse audiences, and provide personalized experiences that cater to visitors’ preferences and interests [45,46].

This study relied on community-based interviews with college students, city officials, and the rest of the community to understand the city’s strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities in Charleston, Illinois, for economic development. The analysis focuses on identifying ways to mitigate the threats and overcome the weaknesses with the strengths and the opportunities at hand. A focus on identifying the assets of the community was used to analyze the community plans for Charleston, and interviews with stakeholders were utilized to discover additional assets perceived in the community.

2. Method and Analysis
2.1. Method

To gain a comprehensive understanding of Charleston, various sectors of the community were engaged in this research. A total of 50 interviews were carried out with three specific categories: local residents, students from Eastern Illinois University (EIU), and city authorities. The study utilized snowball sampling to reach out to Charleston locals aged between 18 and 80, focusing on residents deeply connected to the community. EIU students, aged 19 to 40, from diverse ethnicities, nationalities, and genders, with less than four years of residence in the city, provided a fresh perspective. These students were selected conveniently through student groups and classes. Additionally, city officials aged 30 and above who possess significant knowledge about the city’s future development plans were also included. This group comprised individuals involved in crafting the comprehensive plan and/or members of the city council. They were contacted in advance via e-mail and asked to participate in an interview about the Charleston area. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. A majority of the interviews were held on EIU’s campus at the Center for Clean Energy Research and Education, except the interviews with the city officials that were held at their respective offices.

Qualitative analysis has been used in previous studies to study sustainable community development to analyze issues such as density and infrastructure [47], adoption of sustainable initiatives in the planning process [48] and transportation behavior [49]. Community development focused on economic growth has been noted to be accurately evaluated via measuring baseline quantitative changes, while sustainable development measures institutional, social, and environmental policy, and planning changes can best
be captured via qualitative indicators [50]. As this study focuses on an analysis of the Charleston Comprehensive Plan, a qualitative analysis approach was utilized. As community members are key stakeholders of the community, their perception is considered to be very important to evaluate the present town. The SWOT analyses that identify the city’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are deducted from the interviews. It helped shed light on the city’s development over the past years and the community’s perception of the city at the present moment. Furthermore, in order to understand and evaluate the future of the city from a sustainability perspective, the Comprehensive Plan of the city of Charleston will be evaluated according to the sustainability best practices developed by the American Planning Association. In fact, the Comprehensive Plan is a guide to the development path of the city. A review of the plan allowed the research to identify the sustainability gaps of the city development plans and will support building recommendations for the future.

In this study, questions were geared toward each of the groups in order to gain their unique perspective. The study examined the macro perspective of the town via city officials by focusing on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the community and identifying communication channels and community involvement expectations. The interview included questions such as the following:

- What makes Charleston an attractive city to be living in?
- What are the areas of improvement that the city of Charleston needs to work on?
- What are the priorities of the city of Charleston in addressing these challenges?
- How could the community help the city of Charleston reach its full potential?

For students, the study tried to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Charleston, the likelihood and reasons for students to stay after graduation, and drivers encouraging their stay. Among the interview questions were the following:

- What do you like the most about Charleston?
- What do you dislike about your life in Charleston?
- How likely are you to stay in Charleston after graduation?
- What kind of changes would encourage you to stay after graduation in Charleston?

With the community residents, the study investigated community attachment and involvement, communication with the local government, and improvement priorities, asking questions such as the following:

- What are you most proud of in your community?
- What are the city development plans?
- If you were part of the city planning committee, what would be your development priorities?
- How can you contribute to the sustainable development of Charleston?

The data collected was coded by identifying themes. The principal themes of the interviews can be largely categorized into city strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. The subthemes of strengths are reflected in the attractiveness attributes and the pride of the community. Areas of improvement expressed by the city officials, what students dislike about their life in Charleston and the perceived development priorities to address by the community were identified as subthemes under weaknesses. The subthemes of challenges appear through the threats the city faces in the development of the town, expressed by the city officials, and the change experienced over the years. Finally, the subthemes of opportunities are the desired change expressed by the community, the students, and the planned one by the city of Charleston’s officials. The themes were then compared to the Comprehensive Plan to determine the gaps between planners and locals.

2.2. Results and Analysis

2.2.1. City Officials

The quality of life in Charleston is a strength shared among all officials. It includes the affordable cost of living and the low crime rate. One interviewee commented, "First off,
very, very safe”. Another noted, “It’s, it’s a very tight knit, know your neighbor kind of community”. The university is another strength that is unanimous among all city officials. An interviewee said, “…it [Charleston] has amenities associated with sort of a college town this are not available in like size communities”.

Other strengths that are mentioned but less popular are Lake Charleston, Sarah Bush Lincoln Hospital, Lake Land College, and the variety of other smaller employment bases. While some city officials expressed the need for continual improvement rather than pointing out a specific weakness, references to economic development, city aesthetics, and communication were identified as weaknesses of the city. Among opportunities, the city plans to attract more industries and retail stores, develop tourism activities, build a community center, and maintain a close collaboration with the university. In terms of threats, the decrease in EIU enrollment, in addition to online classes, is challenging the town’s development as EIU students represent an important share of the population and thus an important driver of the economy. Also, a lack of skilled workforce makes it difficult for industries to operate. Moreover, private landownership hinders, in many cases, new opportunities for financial disagreements. Finally, the financial situation in Illinois due to the lack of a state budget for two years poses a challenge to improving the attractiveness of the city.

2.2.2. Students

A total of 6 EIU students were interviewed, and this population was harmonious in their answers. Whether domestic or international, graduate or undergraduates, they like the calm, the central location of the university, the affordability of Charleston, the parks, the lake and the bike trails. An interviewee said, “…it has open spaces. It has calm environment, not the hustle and bustle of the big city. So, yeah, this is something that I liked about Charleston, the nature, the people”. Another noted, “It’s very quiet and easy in terms of, most of the things are close, so you don’t have to travel long distances to get basic needs”.

They struggle with the lack of transportation and the limited options for things to do. “Charleston does have a public system, but the dial-a-ride one and it’s not very convenient”, one interviewee stated. Another said, “The thing I dislike about Charleston is also the lack of leisure opportunities, like where to go beside the movie theater and a few restaurants that we have here. So we are pretty much limited to things we have to do”.

They all think that people are nice but not progressive enough. One noted, “…Being a liberal in a conservative town is kind of an interesting experience. So, um, I’ve always been kind of like shocked somewhat...One of my main development priorities would be encouraging, like, um, like students and people living in town, like interact more with each other. Cause I feel like that’s pretty important is to have that interaction between like town and university people. So that would be probably my main thing, like to do first”.

Students were from 5 different fields of study, and all said that they were unlikely to stay because of limited employment opportunities. Additionally, there is a lack of activities in town. The changes that would encourage them to stay would be having more jobs available, a public transportation system, green efforts such as recycling and clean energy, and more recreation activities available, such as a movie theater or a space for art performances. Students suggest working on cleaning and maintaining roads and sidewalks, beautification efforts, public transportation, green efforts through tree planting, recycling, and clean energy, and have students involved in planning and sharing ideas for improving the town.

2.2.3. Community Residents

The main reason people moved to Charleston was because of family or jobs. Some people used to be EIU students and chose to come back because they missed it, while others came back because they thought of Charleston as a great place to have a family and raise kids. People enjoy the size of the city, saying it has city opportunities without the tradeoffs:
“It is big enough to have opportunities, but it has the small town feel at the same time“. Another interviewee said, “It definitely has a small hometown feel to it with accessibility to larger metropolitan areas. So location is, it’s like the key for, you know, like the secret to its success is its location. So, you know, you can live and enjoy yourself and be comfortable. And then if you choose to venture out and do something, it’s not that far”.

They enjoy the pace of life, the cost of living, the tight-knit community, the diversity brought by the university, the health care services, and the geolocation. One interviewee commented, “What drew me? Basically school. Cost of living afterwards”. The pride of community members lies in the city leadership, the community, EIU, the school district, and the lake development. Community members consider the city government very receptive and progressive. They are proud of the private initiatives for the greater good and community involvement and dedication in times of need. They love Eastern and the opportunities it brings to town (Figure 2).

Development priorities among community members include the following:

- Roads and sidewalks;
- Landscaping and beautification: clean up dilapidated homes;
- Infrastructure for social services to address poverty, food insecurity, and drug addiction;
- Attracting new businesses;
- Instill in students the willingness to stay;
- Green efforts: recycling, clean energy, community gardens;
- A community center;
- Tourism: organizing events and festivals to attract people.

Figure 2. Eastern Illinois University Campus. Ben Miloud. March 2020. The upper left picture represents the old main building, one of the first buildings of the EIU campus. The upper right is a picture of the pond, which is located by the recreation center and near the athletics field in the down left picture. The lower right picture is the Khlem Hall where the technology department is located.
3. Discussion

The most cherished attributes of Charleston (Figure 3) are the quality of life, the community, and the geolocation. The quality of life in Charleston is characterized by the safety, the calm, the affordability, the access to good health care services and education, and the closeness to nature with accessibility to parks. Also, people love their community, care about each other, and have a strong desire to help others. Finally, the proximity of Charleston to bigger cities like Champaign, Terre Haute, and Effingham, makes it attractive to community members to commute easily to these bigger cities to provide for their additional needs outside of Charleston resources. However, having these larger communities nearby provides competition to attract bigger corporations, such as food chains that prefer these bigger cities with larger profits.

Figure 3. Charleston position to Tuscola, Terra Haute, Champaign, and Effingham [51].

The community of Charleston wants to see more things to do, more restaurant options, and more job opportunities, but wants to avoid more traffic and more pollution. People want to preserve the community tightness and keep the city safe. Community members want locally owned shops, but the seasonal presence of students in town makes it difficult for small shops to make ends meet during break times. For that reason, Charleston is in need of an economic activity that would compensate for the seasonal absence of students.

Although factories seem to be the immediate answer to economic revitalization, it is not appropriate for this case. First of all, nearby factories experience difficulties recruiting skilled workforce and end up closing their facilities. Factories also tend to increase pollution in the area. Moreover, Charleston is known for being a white-collar city rather than a blue-collar one. Charleston community agrees with their city officials and believes that working on city aesthetics is rather important to attract more students and more visitors. Many community members who believe that economic development is a top priority suggested working on big annual events that would draw people in and put Charleston on the map. In fact, one community member started an initiative to restore the town’s natural habitat through a butterfly garden. This Urban Butterfly Initiative made Charleston “the butterfly city” of the US.

Based on the desired change, tourism is an opportunity that the city could seize to improve the economic activity while maintaining the attributes that made the community
choose Charleston as a home. In fact, Charleston disposed of many important assets that are needed to make a small town attractive to tourists, such as authentic architecture, art presence, scenery, and history, as shown in Table 1 (Figures 4 and 5). Moreover, the assets that are not currently available, such as a specific commerce or a custom or a famous dish that would normally attract tourists, are easier to implement in comparison to the ones that are needed and already exist.

![Figure 4. Lake Charleston and its trails, Comprehensive Plan 2020.](image)

**Figure 4.** Lake Charleston and its trails, Comprehensive Plan 2020.

![Figure 5. The courthouse of Charleston, Comprehensive Plan 2020.](image)

**Figure 5.** The courthouse of Charleston, Comprehensive Plan 2020.

**Table 1.** Tourism assets in Charleston.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tourism Assets</th>
<th>Charleston Today</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Authentic and well-preserved historic buildings around the downtown square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doudna Fine Art Center, Tarble Art Center, museums, Charlestown Community Theater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular commerce</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuisine</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customs</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography (landmarks, scenic attractions, and nature)</td>
<td>Lake Charleston: hike trails, fishing, bird watching, the Urban Butterfly Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Abraham Lincoln History and museums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People (Notable figures)</td>
<td>Abraham Lincoln History and museums</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the estimates from the tourism office on events attendance summarized in Table 2, EIU events seem to attract more visitors than non-EIU ones. The most popular events that are not college-related are 4th of July fireworks, Christmas in the Heart of Charleston, and the airshow, which tends to gather the current residents rather than bring in out-of-towners. Aside from these events, Charleston seems to attract sports lovers through the Softball State Tournament, “Tour de Charleston” marathon, and “The Candy Cross Bike Race”, in addition to art lovers for “The Muse Fest”.

![Table 1. Tourism assets in Charleston.](image)
Table 2. Popular events in Charleston.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Average Attendance 2018, 2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IHSA Track Meets</td>
<td>EIU</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>29,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fireworks</td>
<td>Coles Co Airport</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIU Graduations</td>
<td>EIU</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>16,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red, White &amp; Blue Days</td>
<td>Morton Park</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>11,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Show 2018</td>
<td>Coles Co. Airport</td>
<td>August</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSA South State Tournament</td>
<td>Ne-Co Fields</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas in the Heart of Charleston</td>
<td>Square</td>
<td>December</td>
<td>4350</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The estimation of the attendance per month for events, shown in Figure 6 below, reveals that the summer season attracts more visitors separately from EIU.

Figure 6. An estimation of the number of visitors per month. Charleston Tourism Office, 2020.

Given the city’s diverse tourism offerings, separate from its university presence, there is significant potential for tourism to drive economic growth. By strategically enhancing current tourism practices, Charleston can rejuvenate its economy and broaden its range of activities. As Charleston’s tourism reputation flourishes, new entrepreneurial ventures may emerge, including bed and breakfasts, restaurants, and rental services for activities like biking and canoeing. This growth not only benefits the local economy but also enhances opportunities for university students, providing them with a variety of activities and potential employment prospects post-graduation.

Charleston is poised to become a popular staycation destination for nearby residents, offering a convenient weekend escape, especially during the summer months. The array of recreational activities available, such as biking through town, exploring lake trails, fishing, canoeing, savoring homestyle cuisine, and enjoying art exhibits and performances, would attract tourists seeking a relaxing getaway.
When looking for the reasons that are bringing visitors today to Charleston, activities focused on art and sport seem to be the answer. However, Charleston holds the three top-ranked attributes needed to attract more visitors with close water proximity, art, and scenery. Facilities dedicated to art in town include the Doudna Fine Art Center, Tarble Art Center, Charlestown Community Theater, and Charleston Alley Theater (Figures 7 and 8).

![Doudna Fine Art Center](image1)

**Figure 7.** Doudna Fine Art Center [52].

![Exhibit at Tarble Art Center](image2)

**Figure 8.** Exhibit at Tarble Art Center [53].

There are various parks in town (Figure 9) and Lake Charleston where it is possible to go fishing, bird and butterfly watching, hiking in the trails, and picnicking (Figure 10).

![Number of parks in Charleston](image3)

**Figure 9.** The number of parks available in Charleston. Comprehensive Plan 2020.
Overall, environmental tourism has the ability to revitalize the economy of Charleston. Environmental tourism requires attention to maintaining the natural beauty of the area to maintain the attractiveness of the town and continue to generate a steady profit. Since destination attractions are recognized as an important factor of tourism destination competition, the maintenance of natural areas is a central need for attention [54]. The Calgary model of competitiveness in tourism recognizes the relations between visitor experience, different levels of quality, and their relationship to prices. When evaluated according to the Calgary model (Table 3), the tourism sector of Charleston presents an abundance of weaknesses. More efforts need to be established in terms of marketing, alliances, human and financial resources, and services to make it competitive. The Calgary model does not encompass environmental quality, yet it is a major factor of attractiveness in environmental tourism [55]. Proper management of the environment is indispensable to maintain the quality of the scenery and thus the attractiveness of the town. Improvements to the Calgary model for future research should include identifying specific environmental and cultural aspects of the area, as these components are essential to sustaining a destination.

Table 3. Charleston competitiveness analysis according to the Calgary model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination Appeal</th>
<th>Destination Management</th>
<th>Destination Organization</th>
<th>Destination Information</th>
<th>Destination Efficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attract</strong></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Internal management</td>
<td>Integrity of experience</td>
<td>Peaceful town with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The tourism office</td>
<td>information system</td>
<td></td>
<td>proximity to nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deter</strong></td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>Research Capabilities</td>
<td>Productivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No tourism services:</td>
<td>Limited marketing effort:</td>
<td>No strategic alliance to</td>
<td>Limited resources and</td>
<td>No estimated profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Activities: canoe, bike rental.</td>
<td>* Lack of advertisement</td>
<td>attract tourists</td>
<td>research capabilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Limited accommodation</td>
<td>* No social media presence</td>
<td></td>
<td>available</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Limited restaurant options</td>
<td>* No independent website</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for tourism activities</td>
<td></td>
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An emphasis on utilizing technology to highlight plans for the community should be considered to bridge the gap between community officials, local residents, and EIU students. A common theme in the interviews by the students was the disconnect from the community members, as well as a lack of awareness about the plans for future development. As events occur both on and off campus that are open to students and community members, more of a focus should be on creating awareness for these events. The community officials could also post online updates on their webpages or via social media on upcoming plans for development, as this information is not widely distributed.
4. Conclusions

4.1. Overview

Charleston, Illinois, a small rural town known for its ties to Eastern Illinois University, heavily relies on the university as an economic cornerstone. Charleston’s dependence on Eastern Illinois University is perceived as a threat by the community, which created the need for additional economic activity to mitigate this threat and create new opportunities to thrive. As a result of this reliance, exploring options for diversifying the economic base of Charleston to reduce its dependence on the university has been undertaken. One potential avenue that has emerged from this discourse is the exploration of tourism as a means of economic growth.

The practical implications of this study show tourism appears to be a strong option in light of the existing assets and resources within the community that can continue to support the growth of environmental tourism. Charleston houses a variety of tourist attractions, including its architecture, history, and art culture, which are often key components in successful tourist destinations. However, there are several weaknesses that need to be addressed for tourism in Charleston to reach its full potential. These weaknesses, based on the Calgary model of competitiveness, include inadequate marketing strategies, limited alliances and partnerships, and a lack of focus on research to inform tourism planning.

To overcome these challenges, it would require significant collaboration between the city, community members, and local businesses to prioritize tourism and invest in marketing efforts. By prioritizing tourism and investing in targeted marketing initiatives, Charleston stands to unlock a wave of opportunities for budding entrepreneurs. These opportunities may manifest in the form of new businesses catering to tourists, such as recreational rental services, restaurants, bed and breakfast accommodations, airport shuttle services, and other transportation amenities that are currently lacking in the town.

Theoretical implications of this study show the Calgary model can be used effectively to analyze small communities in rural areas that include a college campus. The testing of this model in this region demonstrated its effectiveness in this type of setting. One of the key strengths of the Calgary model is its adaptability to diverse community structures. In the context of rural areas with a college campus, this model can provide insights into the interactions and relationships within the community. Via comprehensive analysis, researchers can identify the social, economic, and cultural factors that shape the fabric of these communities. Furthermore, the testing of the Calgary model in this specific region has highlighted its efficacy in capturing the unique characteristics of small communities with a college presence. The model’s ability to account for the nuances of such settings enables researchers to formulate targeted strategies for community development and growth. By utilizing the Calgary model, stakeholders can gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics at play in these communities. This knowledge can inform policy decisions, resource allocation, and initiatives aimed at fostering sustainable development and well-being within rural areas featuring college campuses.

4.2. Limitations

While this study aimed to provide valuable insights into the perspective of the community in comparison to the actual plans via qualitative interviews, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that may impact the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. Three primary groups were used for this study and were selected via purposive sampling. However, increasing the number of students in the study to include a broader perspective as this group was the smallest. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to increase the breadth of the student population for this study. In addition, including faculty and staff at EIU would also help to clarify the perspective of university members, as many commute from other cities to come to work. Having a better understanding of why they choose to live outside of EIU could help contribute to determining what assets other communities have that may benefit Charleston if they were incorporated.
As with most qualitative studies, researcher bias can also play a role in the results of the study. Despite efforts to maintain neutrality, the researchers’ backgrounds, experiences, and personal biases may have influenced the interview process and data analysis. Steps were taken to mitigate bias, including having two researchers analyze the results to assist with ensuring uniformity, but the potential for bias cannot be entirely eliminated. In addition, participants may have been inclined to provide responses that they perceived as socially desirable or acceptable rather than expressing their true thoughts or experiences. This, in particular, could have impacted the responses from the city planners, as they would be motivated to shed a more positive light on the town.

4.3. Recommendations

Future studies on rural tourism located around college towns should take into consideration the desire for campus life and community activities to coincide. In this study, community members believed the university had a positive impact on the area, and students wanted to be more connected to the community outside of campus. This is not always the case for college towns, particularly when the residents want to avoid issues with overcrowding or a strain on resources. This type of community-driven development could strengthen ties within the community and preserve the unique attributes of the city. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to conduct further research to assess the feasibility of such initiatives from a budgetary perspective. By conducting further research on the financial aspects of integrating campus life with community activities, stakeholders can make informed decisions that benefit both students and residents alike. It also may be worth the return on investment to determine which activities are bringing in the most revenue instead of just examining the number of visitors that come to the area for events.

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