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Vital Communities Team Final Research Portfolio

Overarching Outline

The research portfolio was created to outline improvements to Valley Quests for Vital Communities through increasing accessibility to these quests for disadvantaged groups in the local Upper Valley region, such as low-income and physically disabled individuals. Our research portfolio will be divided into five distinct sections, listed sequentially below:

- 1) **Detailed Research Portfolio Outline:** This section summarizes the broad significance and theoretical aspects of our project intervention in Valley Quests. It consists of three smaller parts:
 - a) Overarching Outline: This part contains a brief overview of the project's goals and a description of the portfolio's major sections.
 - b) Key Terms: Major terms used throughout the outline are listed and defined in this section to clarify many aspects of the project. Major terms explained in this part include "inclusive" and "barrier."
 - c) Literature Review: This section elaborates on the sociological literature that supports the central research question and goals of the project. Its purpose is to provide rigorous evidence, using past studies, that justifies the project's trajectory and objectives. It begins with defining the problem of interest and its broader significance both within the field of sociology and for Vital Communities. Then, a synthesis of relevant literature is included that provides substantial backing for the research question and planned goals. Additionally, the section describes ways through which the project can address current gaps in the literature to advance sociological knowledge.
- 2) **Applied Research:** The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the applied research conducted for Vital Communities between April and June 2026. It discusses the research question previously developed in the literature review within the context of Vital Quests and the specific goals of Vital Communities. The methods behind the research conducted, such as surveying strategies to evaluate Valley Quests, are then described. Furthermore, the analytical approach to interpret research findings and the implications of these findings are discussed as well. Finally, challenges and limitations that affected our research are explained, along with strategies used to mitigate them.
- 3) **Project Deliverable:** The main solutions (deliverables) produced through the project are examined and explained in this section. Each deliverable, their creation, and their relevance to alleviating barriers in Valley Quests are described in-depth. A discussion on how the applied research, literature review, and feedback from Vital Communities influenced the design of these deliverables is also implemented into this section. The end

of the section contains a concluding assessment explaining the accessibility, practicality, and alignment of the deliverables with the needs of Vital Communities.

- 4) **Appendix:** The appendix contains the complete, final deliverables for the portfolio.
- 5) **References:** The references section contains a list of all references integrated into the portfolio. All sources are formatted in the 7th edition of the American Sociological Association (ASA) style.

Key Terms

Throughout the research portfolio, there are a number of important and repeated terms, which are defined in this section:

- 1) **Literature:** A collection of peer-reviewed social science publications and studies that are utilized to support the claims made for the project.
- 2) **Applied research:** The practical investigation of the research question and project goals using theoretical ideas from the literature review as a guiding framework.
- 3) **Accessibility:** The ability for a setting or activity to be equally usable and enjoyable for all individuals, particularly those in marginalized groups.
- 4) **Inclusive:** Describes a practice or intervention that fosters open, welcoming environments for all individuals, regardless of their background.
- 5) **Barrier:** Anything that prevents or impedes an individual's access to resources, activities, or settings.
- 6) **Intersectionality:** An analytical framework that analyzes how multiple different social identities (ex. race, gender, sexual orientation) can combine to form unique benefits or forms of discrimination. An example of an intersectional study would be one where a researcher investigates individuals based on both race (black, white, etc.) and whether or not they have physician disabilities.
- 7) **BIPOC:** An acronym standing for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, used to refer collectively to individuals who experience racial and ethnic marginalization.
- 8) **White Space:** Elijah Anderson's (2015) concept describing settings such as parks or outdoor spaces that are informally coded as racially white through their history, cultural associations, and the implicit norms governing who belongs there.
- 9) **Place-based curricula:** An educational approach that uses local landscapes, histories, and communities as the primary context for learning.
- 10) **Sample:** A smaller portion of a group of interest that is investigated in a study. The sample in this study is the six Valley Quests selected by researchers.
- 11) **Generalizability:** The extent to which research findings from a certain, specific sample, can be accurately used to understand a broader population. For example, a study that analyzes a sample of cats and uses it to understand animals as a whole will have lower generalizability. A similar study that investigates a diverse sample of animals and uses it to understand animals as a whole will have relatively higher generalizability.

Literature Review

Introduction

The central partner of this research portfolio is Vital Communities, a nonprofit organization dedicated to alleviating transportation, climate, and accessibility issues in the Upper Valley. One of the organization's significant programs involves the maintenance and creation of Valley Quest, which are free, self-guided activities for community members to explore varied sites in the Upper Valley and their cultural and historical values. The program currently offers more than 100 active quests. Vital Communities' broader mission is to build an equitable and inclusive Upper Valley by addressing the structural barriers that prevent all community members from fully participating in their programs, including Valley Quest. Yet, Valley Quest's program's ability to serve all community members in the Upper Valley depends on whether its sites, content, and supporting materials are accessible to the diverse community. A close examination of the program reveals a persistent gap between its inclusive mission and its structural reality. Based on meetings with the Vital Communities team and broader social science empirical research, even though Valley Quest is open to anyone, there are three interconnected dimensions of inaccessibility or exclusion, which include physical, transportation and economic, and cultural or linguistic barriers.

Physical Barriers

Outdoor spaces, such as Valley Quest sites, are often designed around normative assumptions about mobility/bodies, creating physical barriers that systematically exclude people with disabilities. On the contrary, alleviating these barriers can promote inclusion and a sense of belonging among this group. These barriers can be understood through a key social psychological model: the social model of disability, which explains how broader systemic and institutional structures and assumptions constrain people with physical disabilities, as opposed to individual dispositions (Imrie 2004). The social model of disability can be applied towards understanding specific aspects of outdoor spaces that negatively impact those with physical disabilities and shifts the attention away from what participants can or cannot do towards what the site demands of them. With this framework, emphasis is placed on evaluating and improving the outdoor setting, which would then come to positively influence individual behavior and cognitions. Relevant literature has demonstrated how the existence of disability-related constraints was mainly a function of specific outdoor barriers, as opposed to the severity of physical disability (Burns and Graefe 2007). Notable physical barriers include challenging physical terrain, a lack of facility availability, and lack of accommodation support (Murphy et al. 2025; Corazon et al. 2019). Together, these barriers can decrease mental health for individuals with physical disabilities by producing feelings of social exclusion.

The social model of disability, therefore, can be extended to investigate how interventions can improve the experiences of individuals with physical disabilities. Increasing access to greenspaces through interventions such as building ramps has been found to elicit a sense of community belonging and positive emotions among disabled adults (Corazon et al. 2019). These benefits can also be extended to physically disabled children, who are able to grow their social networks and increase their perceptions of self-competence through increasing physical accessibility (Taub and Greer 2000). Valley Quest is positioned to deliver these benefits,

but only when the site conditions do not foreclose participation before it begins.

Transportation and Economic Barriers

In addition to the physical design of the quest sites, it is important to factor in economic aspects of quest accessibility. Even when the quest is free and physically accessible, access still requires the ability to reach the site and being able to actually do the quest, following the clues provided. Bezyak et al. (2020) found that two-thirds of people with disabilities report that transportation barriers negatively affect their social activity, with recreation among the most impacted domains, directly linking the economic dimension to the disability barriers. Transportation barriers are also related to race and class, where Rimmer et al. (2004) indicate how a lack of transportation was a key barrier to physical exercise and recreation for low-income Black women with disabilities, while Ghimire and Barkada (2024) demonstrate that low-income and BIPOC families disproportionately rely on cost-saving methods like walking and transit. Thus, the accessibility of Valley Quest without a car is linked to socioeconomic barriers. In the Upper Valley's rural geography, where quest sites are dispersed and public transit is minimal, quests that assume car access is available can exclude residents who are low-income and/or do not have cars, which is a significant portion of the community.

Alternative transportation systems can fill this gap, but only when equity is an explicit priority in their design. Research on urban bike-share systems finds that when structural barriers to enrollment are removed, low-income and BIPOC users become high-frequency riders, particularly when these interventions occur within marginalized communities (Mohiuddin et al. 2023; Babagoli et. al. 2019). This is evidence that access design, not individual motivation, is the intervention of interest. This evidence base supports two specific interventions for Valley Quest, including identifying which quests are accessible via bus, e-bike, or walking and aligning Vital Communities' existing e-bike lending program to reach residents who need it most.

Transportation is, however, not the only expensive hurdle to completing a Valley Quest in real life. Even a successful participant, upon arriving at a quest site, may incur additional fees in the form of essential gear or equipment. While there is a large body of research on transportation constraints and their implications on recreational participation, the economic burden of equipment and apparel requirements in place-based outdoor programming has gotten little to no scholarly attention. This is particularly noteworthy for Vital Communities, whose Valley Quest differs widely in the implicit requirements they make on individuals. This is the gap that our field audits also fill, by documenting the clothing and equipment assumptions across the six quests we examined.

Cultural and Linguistic Barriers

Physical access and transportation are important but not sufficient for a more inclusive participation in Valley Quest. The content of the quest can be communicated through language and the structuring of narrative to suggest that some community members are more welcomed than others. The concept of the "white space," as described by Anderson (2015), has historically and culturally coded outdoor recreation landscapes as racially white, meaning that persons of color have to negotiate their presence in ways that white visitors do not. "White space" defines

who feels welcome even before a single clue is read. Less inclusive environments have also resulted in lower creativity and performance among multicultural groups (Lauring and Klitmoller 2015). This is why it is important to investigate closely how clues are presented in Valley Quest programs.

Language is a specific and actionable dimension of this problem. Pertinent literature reveals how culturally specific terminology has resulted in othering, stigmatization, and reduced engagement for racial and ethnic minorities (Lyon et al. 2022; Fernandez-Sanchez et al. 2024). These findings have immediate implications for Valley Quest clue sheets and descriptive explanations of the historical contexts of each site, which may presume geographical knowledge, previous outdoor experience, or standard English proficiency, all of which convey to BIPOC community members that the program was not created for them and that the participant is not you.

Intersectionality: How The Barriers Multiply

The three above-mentioned barriers to participating in outdoor spaces are not independent problems and independent solutions. For many Upper Valley residents, these three dimensions of exclusion—physical inaccessibility, economic costs in terms of transportation, and unwelcoming language framing—operate together. This idea relates to the sociological concept of intersectionality, where the experience of someone who is at the intersection of numerous disadvantaged statuses is qualitatively worse than the total of any particular obstacle (Howard and Renfrow 2014). In terms of Valley Quest, that means their experience of exclusion is not only additive but also multiplicative.

Shores, Scott, and Floyd (2007) precisely illustrate this interaction in the context of outdoor activity. Looking at the intersectionality of race, gender, age, and class with respect to recreational outdoor activity, they found that respondents with multiple disadvantaged statuses, such as older, female, minority, and low income, were significantly more likely to experience outdoor recreation constraints than those with any single disadvantage alone. The study also finds that intersecting identities create different profiles of constraints: older Black women with low incomes reported the highest constraints around economic barriers and health. This matters because it means that treating the BIPOC or minority as a single category obscures the distinct barriers faced by different communities within those groups.

The implications of intersectionality are directly related to Valley Quest programs. A resident of color who is low-income and has mobility issues would have compounded disadvantages. These include transportation barriers that make a physically inaccessible site even more unreachable, and cultural unwelcoming makes the effort feel not worth it in the first place. Focusing on one dimension and ignoring the others will leave the most marginalized residents behind. That is why our audit on Valley Quest looks at all three dimensions together and why Vital Communities' upgrades to Valley Quest will be most effective when they are targeted to reach residents whose barriers overlap rather than addressing each component as a remedy on its own.

Gaps in Knowledge and Project Contributions

The empirical research discussed in this section demonstrates that the barriers across all

three dimensions are structural outcomes of design choices, policy decisions, and cultural assumptions that have historically centered the needs of able-bodied, economically advantaged, and predominantly white participants. This analysis is informed theoretically by the social model of disability, which understands the problem of exclusion not in individual bodies but in institutional design (Imrie 2004). Although first intended to address physical disabilities, the basic logic of the social model that exclusion is built by design and fixed by redesign works equally well for the transportation systems, economic structures, and cultural knowledge that affect access to outdoor programming. A recurring pattern across pertinent literature is emphasis on urban and suburban contexts towards understanding limits and interventions to increase accessibility. Smaller, community-based outdoor programs in rural Upper Valley remain largely absent from the sociological literature, as does the question of how Indigenous histories are represented.

This project fills many of these gaps in literature by auditing samples of Valley Quest sites and analyzing all three dimensions of exclusion (physical design; transportation and economic barriers; and cultural and linguistic framing) in a rural environment in the Upper Valley. In doing so, it provides original findings that can inform immediate improvements to the Valley Quest program and add to a broader sociological knowledge of how structural inequity occurs in rural outdoor educational settings.

Applied Research

Research Question

Through theoretical frameworks explained above, we have come to a research question that the following portfolio will address: How do the physical design, transportation requirements, cost and equipment assumptions, and cultural framing of selected Valley Quests shape who can realistically participate, and what changes could make these Quests more accessible?

Research Design

To answer our research question, our group used a qualitative applied research design focused on evaluating the accessibility of selected Valley Quests. Rather than treating accessibility as a general or abstract value, we broke it down into concrete categories that could be observed across different Quest sites and materials. These categories included physical accessibility, transportation accessibility, economic accessibility, and cultural or linguistic accessibility. This design allowed us to connect the broader sociological literature on inequality to the practical conditions that shape whether community members can realistically participate in Valley Quest.

Our primary method was an accessibility audit of selected Valley Quests. Each team member visited or reviewed different Quest sites and recorded information about the conditions that could either support or limit participation. We paid attention to features such as terrain, trail surface, slope, parking, signage, benches, restrooms, and whether the Quest could be completed by someone using a wheelchair, stroller, cane, or other mobility aid. We also considered whether a Quest assumed access to a private car, special clothing, outdoor

experience, or extra time and money. This was important because a Quest may be technically “free,” but still difficult to access if it requires transportation, equipment, or prior knowledge that some community members do not have.

In addition to evaluating the physical sites themselves, we analyzed the written Quest materials. We looked at whether the clues were easy to follow, whether directions were clear, whether the language assumed prior knowledge of the Upper Valley, and whether the historical or cultural framing of the Quest might unintentionally exclude some participants. This part of the research design was especially important because accessibility is not only about whether someone can physically reach a site. It is also about whether they feel that the activity was created with them in mind.

Our research design was shaped by Vital Communities’ practical needs. Since the organization needed usable recommendations rather than only theoretical analysis, we organized our observations into a coded spreadsheet and evaluation form that could be used beyond our individual project. This made our research both analytical and applied. The goal was not simply to identify which Quests were inaccessible, but to develop a repeatable process that Vital Communities could use to evaluate future Quests and make accessibility a more consistent part of the program.

Analytical Approach

Our analytical approach was based on comparing the barriers we observed in Valley Quests to the three major forms of exclusion identified in the literature review: physical barriers, transportation and economic barriers, and cultural or linguistic barriers. After collecting observations from our Quest audits, we organized the findings into these categories so that we could identify patterns across multiple sites. This helped us move beyond isolated observations and instead understand accessibility as a structural issue built into the design, location, and framing of the Quests.

For physical accessibility, we analyzed whether the Quest environment assumed an able-bodied participant. We looked for features such as uneven terrain, unclear trailheads, long walking distances, lack of seating, lack of restroom access, and poor signage. These details were interpreted through the social model of disability, which emphasizes that exclusion is produced by inaccessible environments rather than by individual bodies. In this sense, a Quest with difficult terrain or unclear directions does not simply present an inconvenience; it actively shapes who is able to participate and who is left out.

For transportation and economic accessibility, we examined whether each Quest assumed access to a car, flexible time, outdoor equipment, or financial resources. This was especially important because Valley Quest operates across a rural region where sites may be spread out and difficult to reach without private transportation. We analyzed transportation not as a separate logistical issue but as part of broader inequality. If a Quest is only realistic for people who can drive, afford gas, own weather-appropriate clothing, or travel at certain times, then the Quest may unintentionally privilege higher-income participants while excluding low-income residents, students, older adults, or people without reliable transportation.

For cultural and linguistic accessibility, we analyzed the wording, clues, and historical framing of each quest. We considered whether the language was clear, whether it assumed familiarity with local geography or cultural references, and whether the Quest presented the space as welcoming to a wide range of community members. This analysis was connected to the literature on “white space” and place-based exclusion, which shows that outdoor and recreational spaces can feel exclusionary even when they are formally open to everyone. By examining both the content and the physical setting of each Quest, we were able to treat accessibility as a combination of material, economic, and symbolic factors.

Overall, our analytical approach focused on identifying patterns of exclusion and translating those patterns into practical recommendations. We did not view accessibility as a simple yes-or-no category. Instead, we treated it as a spectrum shaped by multiple overlapping barriers. This approach allowed us to show how Valley Quests can become more inclusive through specific design changes, clearer information, and more intentional attention to the needs of marginalized community members.

Key Findings

Our findings suggest that accessibility within Valley Quests is multidimensional and has several overlapping barriers. Consistent with the findings of our literature review, we found that the physical design, transportation, economic requirements, and cultural framing all dramatically influence who can realistically participate in Valley Quests. Across the six Quests we evaluated, barriers were often more structural rather than individual, supporting our initial argument that exclusion is produced through design-specific choices, assumptions of access to resources, and language practices rather than any one individual's limitations.

1.) Physical Accessibility

The most consistent physical accessibility barriers involved things like terrain, distance, transportation to trailheads, and very limited safety infrastructure on Quests. Although some Quests were able to outperform these barriers, others required their participants to navigate uneven terrains, narrow trails, staircases, or extremely long walking distances. This makes the Quests like the Hanover Prouty in the minority of those that have wide trails, flat paved surfaces, and even parking terrain for those who are traveling from out of town. The lack of all of these conditions makes the Quest experience much more difficult for someone using a mobility device such as a wheelchair or walker. Given our wide array of cemetery Quests, our team uncovered that this type of Quest was not as conducive to those with physical disabilities because of the narrow trail widths and uneven surface conditions. Not only did the terrain play a major role, but cemetery Quests also typically had parking areas that exceeded 0.5 miles from the starting point of the Quest, posing another challenge for those with physical constraints. In addition to these physical limitations, many of the Quests lacked adequate cell-phone service, making the Questing process too high stakes for those who

may have frequent health episodes that are in need of reliable access to a hospital, if necessary. Beyond this, many Quests were located in rural areas that lacked access to bathrooms, food, and water, all of which would need to be considered in advance for someone thinking about questing.

These findings support the social model of disability discussed in the literature review. Rather than viewing disability as an individual limitation, our observations show how environmental design is what ultimately determines who can participate in this type of activity. Similar to the barriers identified by Burn and Graeme (2007), Murphy et al. (2025), and Corazon et al. (2019), terrain, signage, parking proximity, and facility availability like bathrooms play a significant role in shaping who deems a space accessible. Our findings, therefore, suggest that the accessibility challenges that face Valley Quests are not inherent to the participants but instead are a consequence of the physical design of some of these spaces, which can be altered and modified to better suit all potential Questers.

2.) Economic Accessibility

Although Valley Quests are free to complete, our findings suggest that participation may depend on the access to resources that one has, which often carry a financial cost. To our surprise, many quests required participants to own or purchase a compass, have access to a smartphone and reliable internet connection, have access to a transportation modality that served them in getting to a remote location, and possess appropriate outdoor clothing or recreational equipment. All of these factors contributed to the increased “hidden costs” of the Valley Questing experience. Additionally, some Quests carry implicit expectations regarding access to specialized hiking gear or water sport equipment, creating additional economic barriers for lower-income participants.

Our findings indicated that transportation was a particularly significant economic challenge for Questers. Many Quests were located in areas that required access to a personal vehicle, making it very challenging to participate for those who do not have reliable personal transportation. Despite the fact that e-bike rentals and car rentals exist, this adds an additional unforeseen cost, making it less likely someone would go through the trouble to complete. Furthermore, while e-bikes are an eco-friendly and environmentally sustainable method of transportation, many of the Quests are unsafe to get to with this modality. This finding is especially important within the rural Upper Valley context because, beyond the Advanced Transit system, there are very limited alternatives for getting around.

These findings align closely with the transportation and economic accessibility literature reviewed previously. Similarly, related to Bezyak et al. (2020), we found that transportation barriers can restrict participation even when the opportunities are technically available at zero cost. Our observations while questing supported these

findings, which suggests that access to these spaces is often a more limiting factor than someone's willingness to participate in the space. By requiring resources that are not explicitly stated on the website for completion of certain quests, locals who do not possess the means to access these items are unintentionally excluded from Valley Quests.

3.) Language-based Accessibility

The most significant language-based findings involved colonial framing, limited contextualization of slavery and Indigenous histories, assumptions regarding religion as fact, and the presentation of traditional gendered stereotypes. Several Quests used collective language such as “we” when describing European settlers. This description thus implicitly positioned the settler perspective as the universally accepted one. Other quests simplified Indigenous histories or omitted important context related to the relationships between these Indigenous groups and the colonial settlers at that time. Not only this, but discussions of slavery lacked sufficient historical context, while some references to religion presented the Catholic beliefs as fact rather than acknowledging different faith backgrounds or those who are not believers at all. In addition, several quests reflected outdated assumptions about what it means to be a good wife or how the family structure should look.

These findings support Anderson’s (2015) concept of “white space” and broader research on cultural exclusion in the outdoor environment. Although Valley Quests are publicly available to anyone, local or visiting the Upper Valley, the language and perspectives portrayed on Quests signal the importance of some histories rather than others. This finding is aligned with Fernandez-Sanchez et al. (2024) and Lyon et al.’s (2022) belief that the language choices that are made can influence who feels represented or welcomed in a particular space. As it currently stands, the Quests put forth do not give the impression that some groups are welcomed, which may be the reason that an individual or group never completes a Valley Quest again. Our findings, therefore, suggest that accessibility extends far beyond just the physical accessibility of the Quest and includes the cultural messages within the clues as a key factor of overall access.

Implications

Taken together, our findings demonstrate that accessibility within Valley Quests is multidimensional and must be treated that way. Physical design, transportation requirements, economic assumptions, and cultural framing all intersect to shape the participation of those native to the Upper Valley. For example, a participant with limited mobility may also face transportation-based challenges when attempting to complete a quest, in the same way that a low-income participant may also experience cultural exclusion while questing. These patterns reinforce what was said in the literature review’s emphasis on intersectionality and support our central argument that accessibility should be understood in the structural context, not the individual one. Moving forward, fixing just one of these accessibility criteria is not an option.

Overall, the findings of our research are able to answer our research question by demonstrating that participation in Valley Quests is shaped by several factors: physical, economic, and cultural. Our findings also suggest answers on how modifications to Quest design, transportation resources, updated equipment expectations, and language changes could make the program much more accessible for Upper Valley residents.

Challenges or Constraints and Mitigation Efforts

The design and scope of this research were driven by several constraints and these have direct implications for the interpretation of the findings. Below each is identified, the efforts taken to lessen its consequences, and the next steps it advises for Vital Communities.

1.) Quest Selection and Geographic Scope

Valley Quests analyzed in the research project were non-randomly selected: quests were selected based on the expressed needs of Vital Communities. In addition, the researchers analyzed quests that were geographically closer to Dartmouth College and took comparatively less time to complete. While efforts were made to include a diverse selection of Valley Quests to increase the generalizability of conclusions, all selected Valley Quests had expected completion times of under two hours and were located near Hanover, New Hampshire. Thus, even with limitations, the findings and implications outlined may still not be representative of all Valley Quests. The most important next step for Vital Communities is to extend the audit framework developed in this project to a broader and more geographically diverse sample of quests over time.

2.) Researcher Demographics and Positionality

All researchers were students at Dartmouth College, which, according to Vital Communities staff, is most likely not representative of Valley Quest participants. Consequently, findings and conclusions made by the current researchers may not accurately reflect the perspectives and lived experiences of regular Valley Quest participants. In recognition of this limitation, the team co-developed a survey for Vital Communities to obtain a more representative sample of Valley Quest recommendations in the future. To address this in future research, Vital Communities should use the survey instrument produced as part of this project to gather feedback directly from a more representative sample of Valley Quest participants, using the audit findings as a baseline against which community input can be compared and refined.

3.) Absence of Participant Voices

Participant voices were also not thoroughly addressed in the research project. As a result, the project lacks the inputs of community members such as those with disabilities, BIPOC, and low-income residents. Because of this, our audit does not fully capture lived experiences of these groups. To mitigate this barrier, the research team identified likely barriers to Valley Quest participation based on existing sociological contexts, which may be utilized as a guiding framework for follow-up studies that include participant voices.

4.) Seasonal Data

All quest evaluations were conducted during the spring semester; data thus do not represent variation in accessibility conditions among seasons. Winter weather, snow buildup, and ice on trails can have a big effect on the physical access to quest sites, the safety of journeys by bike or on foot, and the appropriateness of signage and legibility of clues. Vital Communities should consider conducting a supplementary audit round in fall or winter to document seasonal variation in accessibility conditions, using the checklist developed in this project as the basis for comparison.

5.) Equipment Variation

The audit did not systematically include quests that require specialized or expensive equipment, such as water-based quests requiring kayaks or canoes, or missions requiring more technical hiking gear. These equipment needs are another economic barrier to accessibility that our standard checklist was not intended to identify. Both seasonal fluctuation and equipment-dependent quests are relevant next stages for Vital Communities to study, either through future audit cycles in different seasons or through a supplementary evaluation framework designed expressly for equipment-intensive quests.

Project Deliverables

Description of the Deliverables

Our final product includes three complementary deliverables intended to support our community partner's efforts to identify and address potential barriers to participation in Valley Quest programming. The deliverables are described below.

1.) Revised Evaluation Form

The first deliverable is a revised evaluation form designed for Vital Communities to distribute to Valley Quest participants in order to gather detailed and meaningful feedback on accessibility-related concerns. This evaluation form addresses a broad range of physical, linguistic, and socioeconomic barriers that participants may encounter while completing Quests and is intended to systematically assess and document these challenges across the diverse range of Quest offerings. This deliverable directly supports our research question: *"How do the physical design, transportation requirements, cost and equipment assumptions, language, and cultural framing of selected Valley Quests shape who can realistically participate, and what changes could make these Quests more accessible?"* By integrating our revised evaluation form with the existing form developed by Vital Communities, we created a more comprehensive assessment tool capable of generating detailed and actionable feedback. This approach ensures that the experiences and perspectives of Upper Valley community members are incorporated into the Quest evaluation and revision process, helping Vital Communities make informed decisions to improve accessibility and inclusion. As a team, we audited six quests and filled out our evaluation form following our experiences questing.

2.) Coding Data and Spreadsheet

Our second deliverable consists of a Google Sheet designed to help Vital Communities organize and code data collected through the evaluation form (as well as other forms of participant feedback). The spreadsheet includes a place for the name of the Valley Quest on the far left and provides designated fields for coding accessibility-related concerns across seven categories: clothing, equipment, transportation, language, quest problems, physical accessibility, and cost accessibility. These categories were developed through our literature review and represent key dimensions of our three primary areas of concern: economic, physical, and cultural accessibility. The spreadsheet was designed to provide Vital Communities with a clear and efficient tool for evaluating individual Quests through multiple accessibility lenses and identifying patterns across the broader program. To enhance usability, the spreadsheet incorporates a color-coded system that visually represents the severity of barriers to participation. Red indicates more significant barriers to entry, while green represents minimal or no barriers. This allows Vital Communities to quickly identify areas where accessibility improvements may be needed and gather a quick visual overview.

3.) Reflection Papers

Our third and final deliverable was developed near the conclusion of the project in response to feedback from Gabrielle. This deliverable consists of two one-page reflection papers written by members of our team that describe their experiences completing Valley Quests as college students and young adults in the Upper Valley. The purpose of this deliverable is to complement the accessibility data collected from the six Quests we audited by providing a user-centered perspective on the questing experience. While our evaluation framework focuses on identifying specific physical, economic, and cultural barriers to participation, these reflections offer broader insights into how Quests are experienced by a particular demographic within the community. By sharing personal observations, challenges, and overall impressions, the reflections provide Vital Communities with additional qualitative feedback that extends beyond our accessibility assessment and highlights aspects of the questing process that may not be captured through structured evaluation tools alone.

Links to Literature Review and Applied Research

Our literature review and applied research worked in conjunction to directly inform the content, structure, and design of all three deliverables. The literature consistently demonstrated that barriers to participation in outdoor recreation programs are not simply individual challenges but are often the result of structural design choices. Research on the social model of disability emphasized the importance of evaluating environmental factors such as terrain, signage, parking access, and infrastructure rather than focusing solely on individual limitations (Imrie 2004). Additional studies, including Bezyak et al. (2020), Ghimire and Barkada (2024), Lyon et al. (2022), and Fernandez-Sanchez et al. (2024), highlighted how transportation access,

economic costs, and cultural and linguistic framing can create barriers that disproportionately affect low-income individuals, people with disabilities, and BIPOC community members.

These findings shaped our applied research framework, which focused on three primary dimensions of accessibility: physical, economic, and cultural accessibility. During our audits of six Valley Quests, we evaluated each site using criteria derived from the literature, including trail conditions, transportation requirements, equipment and clothing assumptions, costs associated with participation, language accessibility, and the cultural framing of quest materials. Our research findings aligned with our findings in the literature review. These findings confirmed that accessibility concerns and barriers are often intersectional and spread across a wide range of dimensions.

As we completed additional Quests, we encountered new barriers and accessibility challenges that had not been fully addressed in the existing literature or initially considered in our project framework (such as the importance of having a car with four wheel drive or the number of parking spaces). These firsthand experiences allowed us to build upon the themes identified in the literature and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence participation. By combining insights from academic research with our own observations in the field, we were able to refine our deliverables to better reflect the realities of the questing experience. As a result, the evaluation form incorporates in-depth questions related to transportation, physical accessibility, language use, equipment requirements, and cost barriers to ensure that future evaluations capture the full range of factors affecting participation. Similarly, the coding spreadsheet was structured around seven accessibility categories that were both developed from our literature and expanded upon as we continued auditing quests throughout the term.

Final Set of Evaluation Criteria

Table 1. Valley Quest Audit Evaluation and Evidence

Criteria	What is Assessed	Evidence in Deliverable	Points
Feasibility & Implementability	Recommendations are realistic given Vital Communities' resource constraints and require no specialized expertise to act on.	The evaluation form and coded spreadsheet are designed to be implemented using tools already available to Vital Communities that staff members are familiar with (google sheets and google forms). Each category in the evaluation form corresponds to observable Quest features, allowing staff or volunteers to apply the tool without additional training or external expertise.	20/20
Consistency &	Categories are clearly	The coded spreadsheet ensures that	20/20

Reliability	defined, and coding rules allow multiple evaluators to independently code the same Quest with minimal variation in results. The evaluation form standardizes data collection so that responses can be aggregated and compared across Quests in a consistent format.	accessibility barriers can be categorized consistently across multiple Quests. Our seven defined categories reduce ambiguity in interpretation. This standardization allows data collected from different Quests to be meaningfully compared and aggregated, resulting in little variation regardless of who the evaluator is.	
General Usability	The evaluation form is followable by someone with no prior research experience and easy for volunteers and auditors evaluating quests to navigate.	The evaluation form is structured for straightforward use by individuals without prior experience with accessibility assessment tools. The categories on the form are clear and utilize guided responses, prompting questions, and multiple examples, allowing users to complete evaluations without needing additional interpretation.	20/20
Collaboration	The final evaluation form and coding framework reflect iterative input from Gabrielle and Vital Communities, with revisions made based on their feedback at key development points.	Our deliverables reflect ongoing collaboration with Gabrielle and Vital Communities through iterative feedback and revision that can be documented throughout shifts in our deliverables (going from a how-to-guide to a spreadsheet and evaluation form). The deliverables align with Vital Communities priorities and incorporate concerns raised through the development process.	20/20
Integration	The three deliverables connect findings to the literature review's three-part framework (physical, transportation, cultural/linguistic).	The evaluation form and coding framework synthesize insights from both the literature review and field-based Quest participation. Accessibility categories are grounded in established research on physical, language, and socioeconomic barriers and are further refined through direct observation and experiential data collected during Quests.	20/20

Feedback and Incorporation of Feedback

The evolution of our project would not have been possible without the feedback from our peers, professor, and community partner. In our initial meeting with our community partner, Gabrielle, we asked her questions related to the areas of inaccessibility that have already been identified, accessing the former Valley Quests feedback survey, previously flagged quests, primary users of Quests, communities in need of consideration, and website-based materials. We used each piece of feedback to curate our initial deliverables, which were a coded spreadsheet of the 6 quests we did as well as an updated Valley Quests feedback survey. Additionally, we selected the Quests our team attended intentionally based on the flagged quests feedback that Gabrielle gave us. This list contained 17 quests that were flagged for language-based concerns and this list helped tailor our research to the language-based needs of Vital Communities. Beyond this initial feedback, we used feedback from Professor Rogers related to our proposed research portfolio outline, specifically the deliverable portion to update our original iteration of the deliverable. Here, the feedback was “the deliverable should include all the evidence we need to make this assessment” and “I would like to see more development in these areas...both internally and with Gabrielle” (Rogers 2026). Subsequently, we met with Gabrielle to assess where our deliverables were at and see what feedback she had for us to strengthen our final project.

In this meeting Gabrielle looked at both drafted deliverables and agreed that the the Vital Communities Coded Quests would be great for simplifying classifications on the website, but our initial survey could be collaborated on with the survey they already had to ensure all aspects of accessibility were addressed. Beyond these two updates, Gabrielle also felt that having 1-2 college students’ perspectives on the experience questing would raise more awareness about their existence, and we agreed to add 2 personal reflections to our final deliverable. This meeting was the most instrumental in making our deliverables rise to the level that Vital Communities wanted. Here, we were granted access to the previous survey that Vital Communities had embedded onto their website and we were able to iterate on it to generate our finalized Valley Quest Evaluation form. Additionally, beyond the subset of questions both our team and Valley Quest had generated, Gabrielle suggested that we include an extra feedback question where an individual could address any other issues they may have had on the quest that our form did not address. This added another layer of depth to the form because it gives questers the opportunity to speak their minds and make suggestions for future improvements across the board.

Another dimension of feedback we received was in our in-class informal presentations, where we presented our findings to our peers for 10 minutes with a 5-minute Q&A. Here we received anonymous feedback to “get our deliverable more specific” and to “structure deliverable to be more clear” to ensure ease of use by our partner. Taking this feedback, we color coordinated the Vital Communities Coded Quests form so that traits that were inaccessible were easily seen through the color red. Furthermore, we made the accessible traits colored green, those that could be accessible for some and not others yellow, and those that did not

classify as inaccessible or accessible a color that closely resembled what they represented. This dramatically improved the readability of our Coded Quests form and allowed for cohesive representation from the survey results to the coding mechanism. As we discussed with Gabrielle, this adjustment would be easier to implement on the website as well given that a similar color coding system could be implemented on the Vital Communities website.

Lastly, we received feedback from Professor Rogers in our informal presentation that in order to get people to fill out our survey, we would need to make it easy to fill out. This generated the idea that a QR code on the questing box could be a simplified modality, which would hopefully increase engagement. Gabrielle agreed with this idea and we devised a plan to incorporate the QR code. In our final presentation, this idea was further iterated on as we opened our understanding that some people may not have access to smartphones while questing to fill out the survey. Thus, we also suggested putting this code on the main page of the Vital Communities Valley Quest site. This iteration seems much more feasible because anyone who does a Valley Quest will have to access this page in order to get their clues, meaning it is equally high in traffic.

Overall, the feedback our team received this term dramatically improved our final deliverables and we would not have been able to do it without the guidance of our community partner Gabrielle, Professor Rogers, and our classmates.

Concluding Assessment

Collectively, our deliverables translate our research into a practical and usable set of tools that directly support Vital Communities' goals for improving accessibility in Valley Quests. We grounded the evaluation form and coded spreadsheet in both literature and field-based observations to ensure that the final product is not only research-informed but also actionable in practice and reflects real accessibility concerns across a diverse group of quests. The alignment across feasibility, consistency, usability, collaboration, and interpretability demonstrates that our work effectively utilizes academic and applied research in order to fulfill a real organizational need for Vital Communities.

Final Deliverables

See appendices for our final deliverables.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Angelica Valley Quest Personal Reflection

[Angelica's Valley Quest Reflection](#)

Before this class, I had never heard of the Valley Quest programs, and at first I was both skeptical and excited. As an international student from Indonesia, I was curious to learn more about the culture, history, and communities of the Upper Valley beyond the Dartmouth campus. I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to work with Vital Communities through my upper-level sociology class, where we audited several Valley Quest programs and completed quests ourselves. For my experience, I completed the Hanover Prouty Quest and the Beal Cemetery Quest.

What I found most interesting about the adventures was how soothing and centering they felt. Life as a Dartmouth College student is generally a very quick pace, and there is always the temptation to be productive. However, on both quests, I found myself slowing down and paying attention to my surroundings in a way I typically wouldn't. I wasn't racing from one activity to another but focusing on my steps, the landscape, and the clues for the quest. The quests reminded me of the need to slow down and be present, especially in an environment that is so demanding for academics.

I also liked that the quests pushed me to delve further into the local history and community of the Upper Valley. While there were a few points of worry in the phrasing and signals during our auditing/evaluation process, I learned a lot of new facts about the region from the experience. Being a student at Dartmouth put me close to things I would never have seen. In particular, the Hanover Prouty Quest showed me how much local history exists in the locations students tend to occupy. The Beal Cemetery Quest also challenged my critical thinking about how history is conveyed and perceived.

It also helped me to think sociologically about accessibility and inclusiveness while working on this project. In our class discussions and assessments we spoke about how the language, the historical framework, the transportation, and the physical accessibility might affect who feels invited into these experiences. This was really significant to me personally, as I had a multi-cultural and multinational background. Valley Quest has great potential to connect people within and to the Upper Valley. I appreciate Vital Communities' efforts to continue improving inclusivity and accessibility, which help make the experience more fun for everyone.

Overall, this activity was far more meaningful than I anticipated. It was an assignment for a class, but it became an experience that gave me the chance to calm down, get out into nature, and learn more about the Upper Valley community. I had a lot of fun assessing the quests and experiencing them as a participant. I now see why Valley Quest has been such an important tradition for so many in the area, and I look forward to seeing more students at Dartmouth learning about and becoming engaged in these activities going forward.

Appendix 2. Elle Sullivan Valley Quest Personal Reflection

Elle Sullivan's Valley Quest Reflection

As a Dartmouth College student, I had never heard of Valley Quests until my Sociology 65 course, but I thoroughly enjoyed the adventures that came with conducting our final project research. Amidst our group's busy schedules, the spring-term weather made questing a fun "break" from the reality of being an Ivy League student. Our in-class analysis attempted to address concerns of accessibility across 3 main pillars: physical, economic, and language-based. In terms of physical accessibility for me, I found the quests to be very accessible for the most part; however, over the course of the quests, we did identify some aspects of physical accessibility that would not work for all demographics of people in the upper valley. While a vast majority of the Dartmouth population does not experience physical disabilities, there are over 400 students who are identified within the SAS, and thus making these quests more known and better labeled to the undergraduate population could be extremely fun and beneficial. From my perspective, Dartmouth holds the largest "outdoorsy" population, and I feel like many of the students, had they known about Valley Quests, would enjoy the questing experience as well. Hopefully, with our findings, the questing experience can be something that all 4,000+ undergraduates are able to access.

My personal favorite quest from this project was the Hanover Prouty Quest, which, as I've mentioned before, I had no clue existed. Similarly, I think this would be a great introductory quest for Dartmouth students, as they are familiar with the area. Beyond just understanding the local terrain, this quest had zero hidden costs for people like myself because you could walk, scooter, or bike from your dorm to the start site, making it extremely economically accessible. I will say that a majority of the other quests we took throughout this project did come with a small associated fee, which was the cost of gas and driving. While I know Valley Quests is working towards having more e-bikes available, for now, many of the quests are a drive or bus ride away. This limits the economic viability for some students on campus who do not have a car. But Dartmouth does a good job offering rentals through the DSCI, so if students did fall in love with quests, they could still participate. On top of this, the Hanover area has zip cars that can be rented for short or long time periods. All in all, from a college student's perspective, I think the economic viability of doing quests is more possible for those with access to specific resources on campus, but it is more economically viable for us due to campus support than the general Upper Valley population.

In terms of language-based accessibility, this is where I think Valley Quests may lose some of my college student peers. Dartmouth students come from diverse backgrounds; specifically,

there is a huge Native American population and an African American population. Both of these demographics of students, I think, would be turned away from the quests as they are now based on the use of things like slavery and indigenous conquering within the clues. Additionally, I think some students generally would be turned away by some of the religious commentary, as Dartmouth isn't a particularly religious institution. My group mates and I also recognized these things over the course of the quests, and while I do not think it would personally make me never quest again, I do think it made me not want to engage in specific cemetery-based quests anymore.

Overall, I found the questing experience as a college student to be very interesting and fun, but like anything else, the quests have room for improvement. The data we collected over the course of our 9-week journey was extremely informative and allowed us to adequately address accessibility in a manner that should be productive for Vital Communities moving forward. I am pleased with my time and wish that I had found out about Valley Quests earlier in my Dartmouth career.

Appendix 3. Quest Evaluation New

Valley Quest Evaluation Form Final

Section 1 of 3

Valley Quest Evaluation Walk Feedback

B *I* U

Thank you for taking a Quest and sharing your input in this form.

Valley Quest envisions an Upper Valley where residents experience a strong connection to their community by learning more about the geographies, histories, cultures, economies, diverse peoples, and ecologies of the region through a variety of Valley Quests. Valley Quests are designed to be inclusive, welcoming, and accessible exploratory journeys, self-guided by clues and directions, in the built, natural, working, and wild landscapes of this region.

Names

Short answer

Short answer text

Required ☒

Quest Name and Location *

Short answer text

Date you took the quest? *

Month, day, year

After section 1 Continue to next section

Section 2 of 3

When answering the following questions please consider all forms of accessibility:

Description (optional)

How far was your travel to this quest? *

Short answer text

How did you travel to the Quest? If you used a combination of travel methods please select all ^{*} that apply.

- ☐ Bike
- ☐ E-Bike
- ☐ Walking
- ☐ Car-Personal
- ☐ Car-Rental
- ☐ Advanced Transit
- ☐ Other: _____

What type of attire did you need to comfortably complete this Quest?

- ☐ Sneakers
- ☐ Hiking Boots
- ☐ Swimwear
- ☐ Waterproof Clothes
- ☐ Spikes
- ☐ Other: _____

What equipment did you use on your Quest

- ☐ Compass
- ☐ Canoe
- ☐ Walking Sticks
- ☐ Flashlight
- ☐ Other: _____

What this Quest physically accessible for you?

☐ Yes

☐ No

...

If you use or assist anyone who uses assistive devices, would this Quest be accessible with any of the following (click all that apply):

☐ Wheelchair

☐ Baby or Adult Stroller

☐ Cane/ Walking Stick

☐ Walker, Rolling Walker, or Rollator

☐ Power Wheelchair or Mobility scooter

☐ None of the Above, the Quest is only accessible by foot

...

If you or someone you quested with require any of the following, would this Quest be accessible with any of the following (Click all that apply):

☐ Service Animals Welcome

☐ Restrooms Access

☐ Shaded Areas for the entirety of Quest

☐ Shaded Areas for part of the Quest

☐ Seating Options Available for Breaks

☐ None of the Above

Was this Quest Cost-Free?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If no, please explain the costs associated with your quest.

Long answer text

After section 2 Continue to next section

Section 3 of 3

Quality of Quest Taking Experience



For these questions, refer to the notes you took while Questing to refresh your memory. Were the informational clues interesting? Were the clues primarily White-focused history and perspective? Did any of the clues reference the Abenaki or other indigenous peoples to this region? Were there any clues that mention BIPOC history, businesses, culture, or events? Consider how this Quest accurately and inclusively tells the story of the place you explored on this journey. Were there places on the quest where you were prompted to reflect, meditate, and/or rest and take in the experience? What was your overall experience like? What were some highlights/favorites, and what might be a clue or part of the Quest that you would suggest we delete, and why?

Did you notice any concerning language on this Quest?

Long answer text

How easy was it to find the Quest Box?

Please note that while quests can be done year round, the Quest Boxes are only outside from May 30-November 15!

1. Couldn't find it
2. Very hard to find
3. Took a bit of looking
4. Very easy to find!

If you have feedback about how this Quest was not interesting, in part or in whole, please share below. If you have suggestions for improvement, please feel free to share that, too!

Long answer text

Is there other feedback or reflections on this Quest that you would like to share? Your input will help us to make improvements to this Quest and to the Valley Quest program. Thank you!

Long answer text

:::

Did the Quest run smoothly in terms of Navigation, Clues, and Terrain?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Other: _____

If no, what aspect of the Quest needed improvement?

Long answer text

Appendix 4. Quest Evaluation Old

Valley Quests Evaluation Form Draft

Valley Quest Evaluation Form

Form description

Quest Name

Short answer text

How far was your travel to this Quest?

Long answer text

Required

How did you travel to the Quest? If you used a combination of travel methods please select all that apply.

☐ Walking

☐ E-Bike

☐ Walking

☐ Car-Personal

☐ Car-Rental

☐ Advanced Transit

What type of attire did you need to comfortably complete this Quest?

- ☐ Sneakers
- ☐ Hiking Boots
- ☐ Swimwear
- ☐ Waterproof Clothes
- ☐ Spikes

What equipment did you use on your Quest

- ☐ Compass
- ☐ Canoe
- ☐ Walking Sticks
- ☐ Flashlight

Was this Quest physically accessible for you?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If you use or assist anyone who uses assistive devices, would this Quest be accessible with any of the following (click all that apply):

- ☐ Wheelchair
- ☐ Stroller
- ☐ Cane/ Walking Stick
- ☐ Walker
- ☐ Other: _____

If you or someone you quested with require any of the following, would this Quest be accessible with any of the following (Click all that apply):

- ☐ Service Animals Welcome
- ☐ Restrooms Access
- ☐ Shaded Areas for the entirety of Quest
- ☐ Shaded Areas for part of the Quest
- ☐ Seating Options Available for Breaks
- ☐ None of the Above

Was this Cost Free?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If no, please explain the costs associated with your quest.

Long answer text

Has this Quest been flagged for concerning language?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Did you notice any concerning language on this Quest?

Short answer text

Did the Quest run smoothly in terms of Navigation, Clues, and Terrain?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If no, what aspect of the Quest needed improvement?

Long answer text

Is there other feedback or reflections on this Quest that you would like to share? Your input will help us to make improvements to this Quest and to the Valley Quest program. Thank you

Long answer text

Appendix 5. Coded Quests

Vital Communities Coded Quests

Valley Quest Name	Clothing	Equipment	Transit	Language	Quest Problems	Physical Accessibility	Cost Accessibility
Hanover Prouty Quest	Sneakers	None	Walking Distance	5+ Language Concerns	Clues No Longer Exist, Route Requires Self Navigation, Clues Unclear	Wheelchair Access , Stroller Access, Service Animals Allowed, Benches Available , Shade Available, Parking Close to Trail	No Cost
Dunbar Hill Cemetery	Sneakers	Compass	Needs a Car	3-5 Language Concerns	Minimal Signage , Unsafe Terrain, Landmarks Unclear, Clues Unclear	Parking Close to Trail	No Cost
Junction Quest	None	Compass	Walking Distance, <1 hour on AT, Needs a Car	1-2 Language Concerns	None	Parking Close to Trail	No Cost
Post Mills Cemetery Quest	None	Compass	Needs a Car	5+ Language Concerns	Clues Unclear, Minimal Signage , Route Requires Self Navigation, Landmarks	Stroller Access, Limited Mobility Access, Parking Close to Trail	No Cost

					Unclear		
Beal Cemetery	Sneakers	Compass	Needs a Car	3-5 Language Concerns	Landmarks Unclear	Parking Close to Trail	No Cost
Eagle Bluff	Hiking Boots	None	Needs a Car, 4 wheel Drive	1-2 Language Concerns	Clues Unclear	Not Physically Accessible unless on Foot, Shade Available	No Cost

Appendix 6. QR Code

