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Crafting a Campus Sustainability Action Plan: A Grassroots Approach

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Description
In recent decades, colleges and universities have taken a leadership role in developing institution-based Sustainability Action Plans (SAPs). A SAP includes a summation of past achievements, current initiatives, and the prioritized goals and implementation strategies for future action in terms of promoting environmental sustainability. These plans can also serve as pedagogical devices that teach students, staff and faculty important lessons of intentional living, global citizenship, and environmental responsibility. While many plans are adopted as top-down initiatives, there is great value in finding ways to engage the entire campus community in such endeavors at the grassroots level. This project documents a ground-up approach to developing a SAP at Gettysburg College, a liberal arts institution in Pennsylvania. Consisting of three phases, the project began with an assessment of current sustainability accomplishments as detailed in ASHE’s Sustainability Tracking and Rating System (STARS) data base. The second stage included an investigation of recent SAPs adopted by peer institutions and work by the college’s Sustainability Advisory Committee, President’s Office and student groups to develop and implement as campus survey on potential sustainability priorities. Finally, a series of focus groups consisting of various campus constituencies provided input for crafting a final draft SAP, which was then offered to the campus community for a second round of review. This bottom-up approach helped to cultivate grassroots ownership of the resulting SAP, leading to a greater likelihood of successful implementation. This project may serve as a useful model for other liberal arts institutions.

Location
CUB Ballroom

Disciplines
Environmental Education | Environmental Health and Protection | Environmental Sciences | Environmental Studies | Natural Resources Management and Policy | Sustainability

Comments
Environmental Studies Senior Honors Thesis

This poster was presented at the 2016 American Association of Geographers’ Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA, March 29 - April 2, 2016.
Crafting a Sustainability Action Plan: A Grassroots Approach

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Introduction

In recent decades, colleges and universities have taken a leadership role in developing environmentally-aware strategies to address sustainability. However, there is a need for robust and practical solutions that are developed and tested through intentional living and environmental stewardship. Additionally, SAAPs can serve to better the academic curriculum, support student-faculty research, improve the aesthetic and ecological health of campus grounds, and foster a sense of stewardship among students of all ages.

The project explored the overarching positive response to most of the sustainability actions and policies proposed. To gain a measure of prioritization for each action, frequency responses were subdivided and are presented below. The goals or policies with the highest positive ratings for all (see also “most important priorities” section) are shown in Figure 1.2. In total, goals and policies with the highest percentage of negative responses for all goals are shown in Figure 3. In summary, the responses from all groups showed a high percentage of students who perceived sustainability as important, and the most negative responses were associated with the same sustainability actions and policies.

Conclusions

The grassroots approach to developing a campus Sustainability Action Plan provides a more engaging and informative method of identifying critical information pertinent to developing and implementing a successful SAAP at Gettysburg College. While feedback was overwhelmingly positive for most of the goals and policies proposed, some goals and policies were highly prioritized and which goals required additional educators and community discussion. Perhaps most importantly, it identified critical areas in which there was a difference of perception between different campus communities (e.g., students versus faculty, administration, or staff).

The results also suggest there is more work to be done in terms of providing a deeper level of understanding with regards to the costs and benefits of various initiatives. For example, it is possible that the most negative feedback for many sustainability goals is because students reflect a lack of knowledge on costs and benefits. Most negative responses from students occurred when they identified a potentially negative impact (e.g., smaller rooms or parking lot options) to be implemented, impact to Greek life or higher fees, or impact on their personal finances. As more students may be much less concerned that persisted, or even increasing economic, the sustainability response survey may improve education is needed to clarify, the costs and benefits of particular goals and policies. A similar observation may be made for the lack of administrative support for hiring a sustainability coordinator. While this position will require an initial financial cost, there is strong agreement among many institutions of higher learning that the benefits of this position, over time, more than cover the cost. Moreover, all benefits are not solely quantifiable in financial terms as positive externalities in the form of education, aesthetics and environmental health. Nevertheless, findings suggest that clear evidence still needs to be presented to the administrative community to address the costs and benefits of this type of work which will help in the deliberation of more pressing short-term, immediate and long-term goals, as well as contributions for support of implementation.

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Literature cited


Conclusion

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