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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

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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 sustainable approaches to educate students, faculty, and staff to foster a sustainable and ethical sensibility throughout the college and university through intentional living and environmental stewardship. Additionally, SAPs can serve to better the academic curricula, support student-faculty research, improve the aesthetic value and ecological health of campus environments, provide opportunities for campus beautification, and promote a sense of community and sustainability. In the case of the Gettysburg Sustainability Action Plan (SAP), the process has been guided by the Office of Sustainability, the Dean of Students, the presidents, and the faculty. The Gettysburg College SAP was developed by an interdisciplinary team composed of faculty members, students, administrators, and staff from every college and school on campus. The team was led by the Office of Sustainability and the Sustainability Advisory Committee. The process included phases of engagement, planning, implementation, and review. The final plan is a comprehensive and integrated approach to sustainability on campus.

Methods

Phase I

The process consisted of four phases. In the first phase, we gathered information on the procedures involved in crafting a campus Sustainability Action Plan. A workshop sponsored by the Pennsylvania Environmental Research (PERC) offered a starting point. This was followed by a comprehensive review of SAPs and Action Plans developed by peer institutions and a series of informal interviews conducted with sustainability coordinators responsible for creating the original or implementing the plans.

Phase II

In the second phase, we examined the current status of Gettysburg College in terms of sustainable actions and policies, identifying areas of strength as well as those in need of improvement. An initial campus-wide survey was conducted focusing on sustainability practices and behaviors among faculty, staff, and students.

Phase III

The third phase consisted of engaging the campus community in constructive discussions of past sustainability achievements, current constraints, and future goals (El-Sayed, 2015). It involved the establishment of a campus-wide sustainability steering group, the development of a sustainability action plan, and the implementation of sustainability projects and initiatives.

Phase IV

The fourth and final phase consisted of establishing the survey and focus group responses, translating them into a draft SAP document for Gettysburg College. The draft document is currently in use to identify, prioritize, and address sustainability issues on campus.

Results

By far the most amount of discussion between the different groups was expressed within two main topics: "Implementing micro-drafing" and "Installing a sustainability coordinator" (Table 2). Overall there was higher average positive responses from the students (50.6%) for the faculty, staff, and administrated at 58.9% (Table 2). For faculty, staff, and administration, had some of the least positive responses they also had a wider range, from the highest being 52.0% and the lowest at 46.7% (Table 2).

Conclusions

The grassroots approach to developing a campus Sustainability Action Plan is one that provides critical information pertinent to developing and implementing a successful SAP for Gettysburg College. While survey form was overwhelmingly positive for most of the goals and policies proposed, some goals, such as "installing a sustainability coordinator" and "implementing micro-drafing" were highly prioritized and which goals require additional educators and community discussion. Perhaps most importantly, it identifies topical areas which may have a difference of opinion between different campus constituents (e.g., students versus faculty, administrators, or staff).

The process of engaging the campus community will also yield a sense of ownership in the SAP which will translate into greater legitimacy and support for plan implementation (Stimpson, 2005).

The results also suggest there is more work to be done in terms providing a deeper level of understanding with regards to the costs and benefits of various initiatives. For example, it is possible that the overwhelming positive feedback for many sustainability goals from students reflects a lack of knowledge on costs and benefits. Mixed responses from students occurred over questions where students identified a potentially negative impact (e.g., smaller results if a recycling setup were to be implemented, impacts to Greek Life or higher fees, etc.).

An analysis of the results may be much less pronounced that perceived, or even non-existent, the survey responses may suggest more education is needed to clarify the goals and costs 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 most institutions of higher learning that the benefits of this position, over time more than cover the costs. Moreover, not all benefits are easily quantified in financial terms; some positive returns remain in the form of education, aesthetics and environmental health. Nonetheless, findings suggest that clear evidence still needs to be presented to the campus community to ensure the goals and policies we have identified for the college will help in the realization of more greener short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals, as well as contributions toward support for implementation.

Literature cited
