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Crafting a Campus Sustainability Action Plan: A Grassroots Approach

Jolina A. Kenney
Gettysburg College

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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.

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Crafting a Sustainability Action Plan: A Grassroots Approach
Jolina Kenney and Randall Wilson
Gettysburg College, Department of Environmental Studies, Gettysburg PA 17325

Introduction
In recent decades, colleges and universities have taken a leadership role in developing measures to reduce environmental impacts and improve sustainability. This has been driven by a combination of legal requirements, public pressure, and institutional goals. Many institutions have developed sustainability action plans to address these issues.

Methods
Phase 1
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 comparative assessment of SAPs and Climate Action Plans developed by 12 local board institutions and a series of informal interviews conducted with sustainability coordinators responsible for creating and implementing the plans. The school was included in a Delaware College, Swarthmore College, Bucknell University, Wilson College, Lafayette University, and Franklin & Marshall College.

Phase 2
In the second phase, we examined the current status of Gettysburg College in terms of sustainable actions and policies in order to identify areas of strength as well as those in need of improvement (Heinen, 2007). The Gettysburg College Sustainability Tracking and Assessment Rating System (STAR) report provided a comprehensive list of sustainability metrics for the campus.

Results
The survey involved 622 student respondents from a total population of 2,012, providing a 31.2% response rate. The gender and racial diversity of the student population was reflected in the sample, with 14% of respondents identifying themselves as non-white. Overall, the results showed a high level of positive responses to most of the sustainability actions and policies implemented. However, a measure of prioritization for each question, frequency responses were ranked and presented below. The goals or policies with the highest positive rankings for all goals (including “very important” or “somewhat important” scores) are shown in Figs. 1-2. In a similar fashion, goals and policies with the highest percentage of negative responses for all goals (e.g., “very important” or “somewhat important”) are shown in Figs. 1-4. When considering the responses from all the goals the most positive goal was to “improve awareness of existing sustainability efforts” while the most negative responses was to “implement tracking”. As a result of the high priority of the “improve awareness of existing sustainability efforts” goal, the most negative responses was to “implement tracking”.

Conclusions
The grassroots approach to developing a campus Sustainability Action Plan is a powerful tool for institutions. It provides critical information pertinent to developing and implementing a successful SAP for Gettysburg College. While faculty feedback was overwhelmingly positive for most of the goals and policies proposed, greater educational efforts are required for some. The campus-wide SAP has highlighted sustainability goals and which goals require additional educational and community discussion. Perhaps most importantly, it identified specific areas in which there is a different perception of importance between different campus constituents (e.g., students versus faculty, administration or staff). This provides valuable guidelines for next steps in the grassroots approach. The Gettysburg College approach also provided a valuable learning opportunity for community members and students of all ages. The faculty, staff and students of the college have done so in the terms of achieving sustainability goals and the negative responses was to “implement tracking”.

Acknowledgments
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Literature cited

Sample Pages from Sustainability Action Plan

For more information, please contact jknemy@gettysburg.edu.