

Thurston-Mason Counties E3 Leadership Summit June 1, 2007

Results of Session 3: Lay of the Land Higher Education

The Higher Education participants offered the following responses when asked to comment on statements assessing the current status of environmental education in Washington. This summary reflects both comments generated by participants as a group and comments submitted in writing by individual participants.

There were two Higher Education groups participating in this session.

Lay of the Land

1. In general, participants accepted the statement that “undergraduates are increasingly concerned about the environmental quality of their communities.” A number expressed surprise, however, and wanted to examine how this “increasing concern” was being measured. They suggested the statement might be too sweeping: such concern varies greatly among students and schools. Even within the same school, they perceived pockets of concern, rather than widespread student interest.

Concerning the statement that students “indicate that their knowledge of local landscapes, environmental systems, and related problems is limited,” participants tended to agree. They noted that students generally find it difficult to correlate environmental and social science, and are often reluctant to take courses that encompass broader, integrative topics.

Additional observations:

- Some work has been done to pull together resources at universities and colleges to create integrative environmental courses and programs, but the pace of change is “glacial.”
- Greater media attention may account for some “increase” in environmental concern.
- Perhaps environmental education should be a requirement.

2. Many of the participants thought the number of faculty members who “believe that infusing sustainability concepts and practices into curriculum is necessary,” and who are “eager to engage in such work,” is very small indeed and that the statement as written implies more interest and activity than currently exist.

3. There was general agreement that students who do not major in environmental fields have few opportunities to acquire environmental knowledge and skills through the general education classes offered. Academic disciplines tend to be segregated, and faculty members are often territorial about their own disciplines. Some participants suggested that greater

initiative to require environmental education courses, both in high schools and in colleges and universities, might help address this.

4. Most participants agreed that “research expertise and scholarship about Washington’s ecosystems and environmental issues” exist, but are rarely directed toward or communicated with those who could use this knowledge for teaching or curriculum development. Many of those engaged in the research simply do not have this audience and its needs in mind when they produce and publish their research.

Additional observations:

- The role of college administrators ought to be included in this discussion.

Challenges

1. While some participants accepted the statement that environmental literacy and sustainability are not “a general education requirement at any campus in Washington,” some questioned whether this was still accurate. It was also suggested that other barriers must be overcome before colleges will change. These barriers include:

- The number of requirements already in place.
- The absence of such a requirement at the high school level.
- The difficulty of integrating environmental studies if an educator does not have a general background in science.

2. Participants neither accepted nor rejected the statement that students who are not majoring in an environmental field tend to “encounter little, if any environmental or sustainability content in their coursework.” Most of the comments from groups and individuals pointed to cases of such content being included or required. Often, they did acknowledge that these instances are not common. It was also noted that textbooks likewise neglect environmental and sustainability content.

3. The view that faculty members “recognize the limitations of their own knowledge” and the difficulty of keeping up with the rapid changes of these fields, was generally accepted. One of the groups suggested developing sustainability requirements for all teacher education degrees, most especially for elementary teachers, who often neglect science methods.

4. Most agreed that a method is needed to engage students in environmental issues while not overwhelming them or causing them to despair. They thought it important to explore action-oriented solutions, and give students opportunities to act. Some participants made suggestions:

- Include a final assignment that involves an interview with someone in the community who is making a difference.
- Provide hopeful examples.

5. The participants strongly agreed that “faculty and staff are challenged by the scarcity of time and resources with respect to faculty and curriculum development.”

Additional Challenges:

- Currently, there are many institutional barriers to interdisciplinary learning. These include course scheduling, rigid disciplinary boundaries, and disciplinary expectations and requirements. A role model institution might help.
- Some thought environmental education ought to be mandated, but others thought a “mandate” would not be well received by faculties.
- Sustainability needs to be integrated into the curriculum; its importance and relevance need to be demonstrated.
- An environmental science program needs to be included at the K-12 levels in order to produce more undergraduates interested in majoring in environmental science at the college level.
- Society in general is still in denial when it comes to environmental issues. An overall change in behavior is needed.
- Faculty lack the time, money, and flexibility to communicate with one another about this issue, develop interdisciplinary programs and courses, and do sabbatical work in the environment/community.
- Educators need better awareness of and access to quality information and resources.
- There is a tendency to “greenwash” rather than attempt real, in-depth changes.
- Environmental education and sustainability appear to be disconnected from religion/faith.

Opportunities

1. Concerning public statements of commitment to sustainability, a number of participants mentioned their institutions’ own actions in that direction, including green building, revised mission statements, and the formation of a sustainability committee. At least one participant, however, questioned what public statements of commitment really mean.

2. A number of participants were surprised that “most campuses are beginning to adopt sustainable purchasing and management practices.” Most distrusted the statement and thought it unlikely that very many campuses are doing this. A number pointed out that those that have started to do this are not doing it at every level. For example, it was pointed out that WSU recycles and buys local food, but is not doing green building (although someone pointed out that the “state requires all new college buildings to be silver certified”). Some expressed hope that it is a trend that will continue.

3. Participants reacted with extreme skepticism to the assertion that “interdisciplinary learning...is already a hallmark of many higher education institutions throughout Washington.” They observed the following problems with this claim:

- While some institutions pay lip service to this “ideal,” they do not really implement it.
- Most college faculty find it very difficult to do in practice. Working on environmental problems requires one to mix and match disciplines, but knowledge and disciplines are traditionally segmented.
- New faculty who attempt it are committing professional suicide because it does not help them get tenure.
- More interdisciplinary majors are available to students, but in general, students are not taught by interdisciplinary scholars.
- WSU has an interdisciplinary group, but the “jury is still out about its effectiveness.”

4. There was little discussion of this objective. Participants who had not been aware of the “abundant historical and contemporary knowledge regarding the ecological and human communities of Washington” expressed interest in having access to these resources.

5. Some participants questioned whether “more than half of Washington’s colleges and universities” really have “initiated service learning programs and civic engagement initiatives.” They were interested in knowing the scale, and were skeptical about whether the statement accurately reflected the reality.

6. Participants suggested that, if “only half of Washington’s campuses have established teaching and learning centers,” it might be better to consider this a challenge rather than an opportunity. Others thought the statement needed to explore more clearly the connection to sustainability.

Additional Opportunities:

There are good opportunities for field work in our area.

The social and political winds are more favorable now (and probably into the future as well).

The public is becoming more aware of environmental issues.

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