

Thurston-Mason Counties E3 Leadership Summit June 1, 2007

Results of Session 4: Bridging the Gap Higher Education

The Higher Education participants were asked to comment on a series of goals for environmental education in Washington. This summary of their responses 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.

Meta Goal: Significant numbers of students will encounter environmental and sustainability learning in their undergraduate coursework.

The participants agreed with the Meta Goal, but added that the undergraduate experience must include fieldwork as well as interdisciplinary work. A number of them also wanted to extend the goal to include *all* students.

Goal 1: Expand and strengthen opportunities for undergraduates to learn about the Washington environment, its issues, and the emerging field of sustainability, especially in introductory and general education courses.

Observations and concerns:

- There is a risk that this type of study of the local bioregion will itself be “unsustainable,” because it requires students and educators to do so much traveling even for local fieldwork, and thus currently requires burning fossil fuels.
- On a practical level, there is no space for this.
- Both faculty and administrators must be included in discussions and recognize the importance of this issue.

Suggestions:

- Change “expand and strengthen” to “expand and prioritize.”
- Require that such opportunities include an active, field component.
- Make use of resources we already have, such as those at the Washington Center.
- Draw upon the curricula other colleges have already created.
- Develop learning communities around sustainability themes.
- Identify agencies that offer support to environmental studies, and solicit support from area businesses.

Goal 2. Create environmental and sustainability learning opportunities for faculty members.

This goal was generally accepted.

Observations and concerns:

- Faculty tend to be territorial about their subjects, and object to non-experts attempting to teach in their disciplines. (E.g., science faculty object to those in other disciplines teaching science, just as English faculty would object to science faculty teaching writing and poetry.)
- Attempting to create and implement an interdisciplinary approach will take faculty time and cost money.

Suggestions:

- Add the following to the goal: “Ensure that all campuses offer and support an interdisciplinary approach to teaching sustainability.”
- Develop a system for funding guest speakers to provide expertise in the subject matter in which the teacher is not an expert.
- Have faculty work together and share expertise both to develop curriculum and teach interdisciplinary courses.
- Create a Puget Sound consortium (like the Hudson River consortium), including all colleges and universities from Bellingham to Portland. Use field trips around the Sound (or along the Columbia River) as opportunities for discussion and learning, both among educators and between educators and stakeholders (farmers, tribes, government, businesses, etc.). Local environmental problems could supply a focus. Students could also be included in these learning experiences.
- Increase field studies.

Goal 3. Develop our campuses as bioregional learning laboratories, so students can both study and contribute to the care of the campus landscape and to sustainable campus practices.

This goal was well received, though participants had some concerns and suggestions.

Observations and concerns:

- One of the primary challenges may be getting students to think of the campus as their “home”/community. Many seem to feel disassociated, either because they do not actually live on campus or because they are aware that they will be there only a few years. Some students also seem to feel a sense of entitlement.

Suggestions:

- Perhaps student work programs and similar projects can be devised to involve students and encourage closer identification with the campus.
- Investigate also other areas outside of the campus, including business, social service areas, and the entertainment sector.

Goal 4. Create a clearinghouse for sharing environmental education and sustainability studies resources and teaching approaches.

There appeared to be general agreement with this goal.

Suggestions:

- Hold more conferences and workshops to facilitate communication and build enthusiasm among faculty and staff. Hold more statewide conferences.
- Create a permanent, centralized storage site—perhaps at the EEAW or Washington Center website.
- Include links to agencies and organizations that can provide support, internships, and the like.

New Goals

- Include entrepreneurship and businesses in environmental education. If sustainability and environmental studies relate to a range of subjects, such as finance and entertainment, students are more likely to be engaged and to apply knowledge.
- Create opportunities for students to work off campus on sustainability, restoration, and conservation projects. Students learn practical skills and improve the community through exchange of skills and knowledge with other members of the community.
- Provide support for interdisciplinary studies. Statewide systems to encourage, model, and provide resources for interdisciplinary studies are essential to overcome the significant institutional barriers.

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