A Campus Sustainability Service Program in the General Education Curriculum

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Proposal for UR Sustainability Strategic Plan

Abstract

This poster describes a proposal for the addition of a sustainability-based community service requirement to the general education curriculum to encourage systemic involvement in on-campus sustainability projects. Current support for the University of Richmond's (UR) goal to integrate sustainability across various University functions is limited and this poster outlines the Campus Sustainability Service (CSS) program as an option for addressing the issue to ensure the success of the UR Sustainability Strategic Plan. It presents a framework for the CSS program and a strategy for piloting the initiative that can support phasing in a complete version of the program over time. The poster also discusses how this proposal benefits the University and its students, staff, and faculty, emphasizing impacts on the school's performance as an AASHE member, campus well-being, and student life outside of campus.

Current Campus Sustainability Involvement: Limited

- Today, multiple University programs encourage campus involvement in UR's goal to integrate sustainability across departments and operations. Programs such as the River City Project, Green Room Program, and University of Richmond Office Supply Exchange provide opportunities for involvement from all sectors: students, staff, and faculty (University of Richmond Office for Sustainability, n.d.).
- Though UR's sustainability goal has support from across campus, only a small percentage of each sector is involved. For example, an estimate of approximately 150 students out of 2,999 undergraduates were involved in a University sustainability program during the past year (Andrejewski, 2018; University of Richmond Office of Admission, n.d.).
- Increasing sustainability involvement from students, staff, and faculty can help make UR's sustainability initiative more cohesive and more successful.

CSS Program Overview

The CSS program encourages increased involvement from all sectors on campus to promote UR's Sustainability Strategic Plan by requiring all undergraduate students to participate in on-campus community service projects that work to invigorate the school's sustainability efforts. This proposal recommends the addition of the CSS program to UR's required general education curriculum, and relies on staff and faculty to regularly function. The program creates not only an experience for all students to share, but one for students, staff, and faculty to interact and form relationships outside of the classroom environment.

Table 1. Possible On-Campus CSS Projects

Project Focus	Size of Student Group at Project	Potential Staff to Run the Project	Tasks Students Perform
Landscaping	15	UR Landscaping Staff	Daily landscaping tasks, such as emptying outdoor trash cans, spreading pine straw and hardwood mulch, planting native annual flowers, watering campus plants, and weeding (Moyer, 2018). Students also assist with surveying efforts for the proposed biodiversity management plan (Psarakis, 2018).
Gardening	5	-UR Landscaping Staff -Hired Staff for the Proposed Community Garden Plan (Hingst, 2018)	Assisting with maintenance of the proposed expansion of the on-campus garden (Hingst, 2018). Students are responsible for planting of crops, watering, pruning, staking, weeding, and harvesting.
Campus Building Waste Audits	10	UR Custodial Staff	Help conduct waste audits of campus buildings by pre-weighing waste, properly sorting waste, then re-weighing the waste to determine the performance of waste disposal in each building on campus.
Dining Hall Food Waste Sort Station	5	Office for Sustainability Interns	Before dining hall customers place their plates on the dish rack, students help the individual sort their food waste into either the landfill, recycling, or compost bin while educating them about the impacts of food waste.

How the Program Works

- For Students: All undergraduates are required to complete a weekly three-hour service commitment for three consecutive weeks, followed by a one-hour commitment for a reorientation session during a fourth week. This totals to a 10-hour time commitment over each student's UR career.
- For Staff: Eligible staff members guide and educate students about a campus sustainability service project. A staff member leads the same project for a group of 5-15 students throughout the course of the three weeks. Ideally, staff in this leadership position oversee a service project related to their current work.
- For Faculty: Full-time faculty members run the reorientation component of the program. These faculty members are responsible for meeting with students after completion of the service requirement to guide an individual through an informal, verbal reflection of the service project.
- The CSS program is designed to support 840 students (210 participants from each class year) every year through the help of approximately 574 eligible staff members and 411 full-time faculty members rotating to run either the service or reorientation components of the initiative (IFX Official Census Admissions Files, 2016).

Figure 1. UR Students Volunteering at Shalom Farms, a Model for the CSS Gardening Project. Photo by author.

Program Numbers

Since the CSS program only requires a four-week commitment from students, the program can repeat with a new cycle of student participants three times a semester. If 140 students participate in each four-week cycle of the program, and there are a total of six cycles throughout the course of two semesters, the initiative can support 840 students every year. When fully implemented, the program randomly chooses 210 students from each class year using a lottery system. A similar lottery system is used to randomly assign the participants to one of six cycles of the program.

For 140 students to volunteer during each cycle of the CSS program, approximately 16 staff members and 140 faculty members are needed to run each cycle. As staff and faculty members running the program rotationally participate, the initiative annually requires a total of 96 different staff members and all 411 full-time faculty members. Though each of the 96 staff members is responsible for leading a project once a year, full-time faculty members conduct reorientation sessions with a student two to three times a year.

Figure 2. Sample Schedule with the Program

Piloting the Initiative

The extensive infrastructure required to operate the CSS program makes immediately launching the program a daunting feat. By piloting the initiative over the course of a year, the University explores the long-term prospects of the initiative on a smaller scale to determine if the program is a beneficial additional to the school and should be fully introduced into the general education curriculum. Under the one-year pilot CSS program, 35 randomly chosen first-year students participate in each four-week cycle of the program, involving a total of 210 undergraduates and requiring fewer on-campus projects. Due to the smaller number of student participants and service projects, the pilot program requires a total of 24 eligible staff members and 210 full-time faculty members to operate the initiative over the course of six cycles. In the case of the pilot program, both staff and faculty members only participate in one cycle of the initiative.

Implementing the Complete Program

If completely implemented, the CSS initiative can easily transition from the pilot program over the course of three years. During the year following the pilot program, 210 more undergraduate participants are added through randomly selecting 210 students from the incoming first-year class in addition to 210 participants from the now sophomore class for a total of 420 student participants throughout the year. The next year, 210 more participants are added in a similar manner to increase total participation to 630 undergraduates and include 210 participants from each of the first-year, sophomore, and junior classes. Finally, the initiative expands to the complete program during the third year after the pilot program through the addition of 210 randomly selected students from the senior class to create a program that allows 210 students from each class year to participate in the CSS initiative every year, resulting in a total of 840 undergraduate participants annually.

Benefits of the CSS Initiative

- The program creates a shared experience for students from diverse campus groups to meet and interact with each other, encouraging new student friendships.
- Increasing student, staff, and faculty communication outside of the classroom helps create a more cohesive campus community. Research shows a connection between social cohesiveness and happiness, suggesting that the community cohesion fostered by the CSS initiative can create a more enjoyable campus environment to balance the stressful conditions often promoted by academics and work (Cloutier & Pfeiffer, 2015).
- Through experiential learning at service projects, students gain skills that are transferable to everyday life, such as knowledge about gardening or lawn care.
- Many of the service projects require physical activity, which is shown to decrease stress levels in college students (Baghurst & Kelley, 2014). Through building a required service commitment with physical activity into the curriculum, the CSS initiative creates an academic break for students.
- There is expressed interest from staff members regarding increasing staff-student interaction, and the CSS program is a great tool for improving the current relationship between these two campus groups (Moyer, 2018).
- The CSS program can augment the University performance as an AASHE member by increasing the STARS points that the school receives for the Campus & Community Engagement category from 27.1 points to 31 points out of 41 possible points (University of Richmond Office for Sustainability, 2017).
- Through service projects that form the foundation of the program, UR can also earn additional STARS points in categories such as Grounds, Food & Dining, and Waste (AASHE, 2017).

Figure 3. UR Students Assisting with a Waste Audit. Source: Finley-Brook, M. (n.d.).

Acknowledgements

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