Creating a Living & Learning Laboratory for Applied Sustainability and Campus Farm Through Collaboration and Student Engagement

Southern Oregon University

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Project Overview
Through a collaborative effort among the campus and local community, Southern Oregon University created a living and learning laboratory for applied research and projects in sustainability, The SOU Center for Sustainability. The Center serves as a community resource for sustainability education, fosters sustainable business development, promotes interconnectedness, and facilitates leadership training through thoughtful learning and practice. The Center highlights culture and tradition, models equity, promotes ecological consciousness, and values fiscal responsibility. Its innovative structure encourages service learning by providing a place for community-based problem solving, civic agriculture designed to alleviate food insecurity, and an explicit focus on synergistic partnerships.

Background
In October 2012, SOU's Sustainability Council charged a Sustainability Center Committee to explore the potential of an on-campus lab for campus-wide sustainability projects and demonstrations. As a university committed to sustainability, it was evident that there was a need for space to foster hands-on sustainability projects and research. The committee also recognized a need to alleviate food insecurity within SOU's student body. As a result, the committee organized students, faculty, staff, administration, and community partners to develop plans for a sustainability center and campus farm. The group conducted extensive research, utilizing staff and community expertise, while engaging nearly 40 students in various aspects of the project. In spring 2013, the Committee presented the final proposal to the President's Sustainability Council, the University Planning Board, and the Executive Council. Approval of the project was officially announced by President Mary Cullinan during the University's commencement ceremony in June 2013.

Goals
The SOU Center for Sustainability is a living and learning laboratory for applied research and projects in sustainability. The Center serves as a community resource for sustainability education, fosters sustainable business development, promotes interconnectedness, and facilitates leadership training through thoughtful learning and practice. The goals of the project are to:
Serve as a collaborative community learning space Promote personal growth, collective leadership, and transformation Promote resilience in the face of an uncertain future Actively engage the community in hands-on authentic learning Promote biodiversity, wildlife conservation, and land stewardship Provide the SOU student community with healthy, affordable, local food Encourage student empowerment, leadership, and action Demonstrate appropriate technologies Serve students as a transdisciplinary laboratory Equip the community with sustainable skills and practices Demonstrate sustainable building and landscape management Provide a space for business development, incubation, and growth Explicitly establish K-16 collaboration designed to foster ecoliteracy Demonstrate the ecological viability of small-scale farming in Southern Oregon Interpret sustainability for SOU students, local children, and the wider community

While living and learning laboratories or spaces for applied sustainability research in themselves may not be novel ideas, SOU's Center for Sustainability is unique in that it explicitly integrates the arts and the local community. The project plans include a campus farm, an apiary garden, outdoor classrooms, a children's garden, art installations, and more. The Center is intended to be a space for the university and community to explore the many dimensions of sustainability through applied research and hands-on experiences. Center for Sustainability Vision: The SOU Center for Sustainability serves Southern Oregon as an interdependent hub of innovative sustainability training, leadership, and technology. Through community and industry partnership, the Center models a learning space for innovation, global citizenry, and sustainable living. The Center adds beauty to the SOU campus as a place of art, resilience, thoughtful activity, and transformation. SOU students, faculty, and staff work collectively with community leaders, children, families, businesses, neighbors, leaders, and government to train sustainability leaders through hands-on authentic solution development. The Center is a place that showcases culture and tradition, models equity, promotes ecological consciousness, and values fiscal responsibility. The innovative structure of the Center encourages service learning by providing a place for community-based problem solving, civic agriculture designed to alleviate food insecurity, and an explicit focus on synergistic partnerships.

**Implementation**

Through a truly collaborative effort between faculty, staff, students, community members, and a third-party landscape architecture firm, SOU's Center for Sustainability was approved in June 2013 and began implementation shortly thereafter. A faculty member accepted the position as Director of the Center, coordinating student employees and volunteers to begin renovating an old farm house to serve as the Center for Sustainability. The Facilities Management and Grounds Departments dedicated many hours to renovating the house and preparing the adjacent five acre field for irrigation and electrical infrastructure required before establishing the farm. Seven student employees and more than 3,000 hours of volunteer work were contributed to clear the land, renovate the Center, and launch the Center for Sustainability. Students and staff conducted campus and community outreach events, planted spring plantings and fruit trees, applied for more than $70,000 worth of grants to support the future of the project, and continue to meet and exceed the phased timeline.

**Timeline**
Phase 0-I: 2012 - SOU team of students and faculty, led by business student Shaun Franks, makes the finals of Oregon University System's first "Oregon Social Business Challenge" with a sustainable student farm project as a model for fighting local food insecurity. The outlined Center for Sustainability will serve as a community education and gathering space, a multifaceted organic farm and a resource for student research in the fields of environmental science and business. - A five-acre field is secured adjacent to ScienceWorks Hands-On Museum, across the street from Ashland Middle School. The site features an old house and small barn. Phase I-II: 2013 - 35-page Sustainability Center Design Proposal is written, outlining the mission, vision, budget, partnerships and phase planning for the Center. - Hired Greg Covey, Landscape Architect, to design and present master plan to the University Planning board. Board unanimously votes to accept proposal. SOU President announces Center for Sustainability to public. - SOU Environmental Affairs Committee students approve $200,000 from Green Fund, allocated to the Center for Sustainability as seed money. - Eight seniors completed their capstone projects through the Center for Sustainability - 3,000 square yards of fill are sifted or removed from the site, creating a 'blank canvas' for the Center for Sustainability. Site cleared of debris. - Seven student positions are created and hired related to the Center for Sustainability - A team of over 20 Center for Sustainability volunteers (students, faculty, community members) spent over 1,500 hours organizing, writing, researching, mapping, and meeting with partners and other stakeholders. - Website launched, offering over 60 courses related to Center for Sustainability as well as multiple degree programs, concentrations and certifications through SOU. - Outdoor classroom planned and approved as part of student project. Phase II: 2014 - House renovations completed: carpet removal, painting, and plumbing. House is now available for meetings and staff use - Crop plans including annuals, perennials and trees is drafted in committee - Hoophouse and plant propagation purchases - Interpretive education master plan is drafted, creating interactive signage throughout site - Upcoming: o Crop plans including future rotations are finalized, begin planting o Hoophouse and plant propagation chambers installation o Outdoor classroom construction complete o Essential or temporary washing, packing, storage facilities designed and prepared for use o On-site irrigation upgraded, installed, and available for use o Student and faculty research on site Phase III 2015-2017: - Perennial and ornamental plantings - Outdoor kitchen is designed, installed and being utilized by staff and students - Year-round production using hoophouses and season extension techniques - Public gathering spaces and public restrooms are ADA compliant and open to public - House repairs continue to prepare for student housing and public restrooms - Solar, wind or other energy and technology demonstrations are planned and early installation/use - Interpretive signage and public art throughout site Phase IV: Winter 2018 and beyond - House renovations complete for public use and residence - First floor art exhibits in house - Partnered research and teaching - Expand curricula offerings for SOU students, youth and public - Research collaboration

**Financing**

The Center for Sustainability estimated start-up costs of $162,453 for site development and payroll expenses. While the farm component of the Center for Sustainability intends to be self-sustaining by its fifth year of operation, the project will require funding for the first five years in order to establish the farm and develop the Center. Members of the Sustainability Center Committee approached the Environmental Affairs Committee (EAC) in spring 2013 to request a total of $200,000 to support the project for five years.
EAC voted to provide the requested funds to support the Center. The project also received $5,600 from the campus general fund and in-kind donations in the form of faculty and staff time. Once established, the farm will sell produce back to campus in the form of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscriptions, as well as to campus dining, to support the continued operation of the farm. The project has applied for more than $70,000 worth of grants, receiving a commitment of $17,000 to date.

Results
The Center for Sustainability project has met and exceeded its expected results to date. Since receiving University approval in June 2013, the project has engaged hundreds of students in practical sustainability projects and become a highly valued and anticipated program in the community. The Center for Sustainability transformed a five acre field that was previously used as a dumping ground for construction debris into an irrigated field, with 100 fruit trees, a hoop house, and plans for spring plantings, outdoor classrooms, art installations, and more. The project created seven new student jobs, providing students with hands-on experience in project management, community outreach, volunteer coordination, marketing, research, networking, collaboration, and sustainable farming practices.

Lessons Learned
The success of the Center for Sustainability project has underlined the power of collaboration, partnership, and cooperation across disciplines and throughout communities. We have learned that we can accomplish incredible things when we bring together the skills, knowledge, and energy of students, staff, faculty, and the administration. Upon launch and implementation of the project, we learned that it is important to have a lot of opportunities outlined for volunteers before launching the project. When we first announced the project and slowly began implementation, dozens of volunteers expressed interest in donating their time and expertise to the project. At times, we did not have enough volunteer tasks lined up to accommodate everyone, and would like to have been more prepared for the overwhelming interest in involvement we received from the campus and the community.