

# Inter-Campus Sustainability Collaboration

## Whatcom Community College

## Western Washington University



Recommendations to achieve more inter-campus connection and student collaboration on sustainability issues between Western Washington University and Whatcom Community College.

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## Introduction

### 1.1. The Intent of this Project

In the Whatcom County region there are four institutions of higher education: Western Washington University, Northwest Indian College, Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College. As institutions begin to take action to green their campuses, a logical step in that process is to establish regional partnerships and develop support systems for inter-campus sustainability. The purpose of this report is to present research and suggest avenues for action to achieve more inter-campus connection on sustainability issues.

This report specifically focuses on how to achieve more sustainability collaboration between the students of Whatcom Community College and Western Washington University. I explore how to foster more campus connections by providing the reader with an understanding of the current campus sustainability scene at each institution. In addition, I will present my research, the information from my interviews and connections with sustainability leaders on Whatcom's campus and my recommendations on how these two institutions can overcome barriers and achieve lively, continuous student sustainability collaboration.

### 1.2. The Benefits of Intercampus Sustainability Collaboration

In the interest of doing all we can to reduce our impact on the planet, inter-institutional collaboration on sustainability issues is a step toward meaningful regional change. When institutions and groups of people (students, faculty, administrators, operations staff) engage in conversations and activities to share experience, insights, and challenges in working toward campus sustainability, all parties involved support each other and, in turn, empower each other to work toward sustainable change. Connection and systems of mutual support ensure efficient use of our energies and resources. If we can learn from colleagues' mistakes and successes, we are that much closer to achieving our goal.

Additionally, sustainability is a complex issue with a worldwide scope. An institution or a group of students isolating themselves in trying to solve this issue goes against the fundamental scale and scope of the problem. Modifying behavior and changing our ways of functioning in order to reduce our impact on our environment is inherently interdisciplinary. What one institution does or does not do affects not only other institutions but an entire region. If an institution or student group is serious about greening its campus out of a genuine concern for the environment, it should seek to foster relationships with other institutions and groups, not only in order to reach its own sustainability goals but ultimately to achieve significant change in a region.

### 1.3. The Main Differences Between a Commuter Campus and a Residential University

Whatcom Community College and Western Washington University differ significantly in the make up of their student body and the characteristics of their campus communities. Whatcom is classified as a commuter campus. In an online article Michael Pollick describes commuter colleges well in writing,

“A commuter campus student body is often composed of local residents who live with their parents or live in their own off-campus apartments. Older students returning to school for additional training or a new degree often choose to attend a local commuter college instead of moving to a distant traditional college which may be too youth-oriented. A commuter school may offer some social programs for students, but its main emphasis is on instruction. Attending a commuter college often makes better financial sense for students who are not interested in the traditional college lifestyle or experience” (para 1).

Pollick’s characterization of commuter colleges points out three important differences between commuter and traditional university campuses:

- ◇ Students’ residential location
- ◇ Students’ academic focus
- ◇ The typical demographics of each type of institution

Universities typically have a critical student mass on campus most of the time because of its residential dormitory set up. However, most commuter colleges clear out after a certain point during the school day because students leave school to go home or to work.

Secondly, at universities most students are full time students whereas there are different, often more flexible academic paths at a commuter college. Commuter college students may be attending school part-time, at night, taking online courses or just receiving vocational training once a week on campus.

Finally, the traditional university has a specific lifestyle or experience associated with it being more “youth-oriented.” There is more diversity among a commuter college student body with adults returning to school or first generation college students taking advantage of community college’s affordability, for example.

*These critical differences between commuter colleges and universities are the root of the important issues needing to be addressed in stimulating more student to student inter-campus collaboration and connectivity on sustainability issues.*

## Methodology

In order to delve into the existing connection between Whatcom and Western and the sustainability scene on each campus, I utilized contacts and meetings with people experienced in the campus sustainability at both institutions. *My main focus was to identify the best way to establish a dynamic connection between two distinctly different campuses.* In researching how to make connections, the first step was research and grasp what each institution was already doing in the way of campus sustainability and then identify the challenges and barriers to inter-campus collaboration on sustainability issues. My interviews and research culminated in a focused awareness of the challenges inhibiting a dynamic inter-campus connection and three suggested avenues for action in overcoming those barriers.

### 1) Western's Sustainability Scene

Western Washington University is known for its campus sustainability, and its extensive green efforts cannot be summed up in a paragraph. A few highlights of Western's sustainability scene are its comprehensive sustainability standards for its operations staff, its environmental and sustainability-focused academic programs, its established Office of Sustainability and its multiple environmental programs and offices run by students as well as full time staff. In looking for *relevant connection points for potential inter-campus student collaboration* in Western's campus sustainability programs, one major student sustainability hub stands out: the AS Environmental Center.

The Associated Students of Western maintains the Environmental Center, a networking and resource center for students interested in environmental issues. The center functions as a place for students to connect with others around that interest. The Environmental Center regularly puts on events and hosts meetings for the environmental community on Western's campus. These speaker, film and music events and meetings of student sustainability leaders are obvious connection points where Whatcom students could engage in Western's environmental community and connect with Western students on environmental issues.

### 2.2 Whatcom's Campus Sustainability Scene

Campus sustainability at Whatcom Community College takes the form of a student sustainability club and a Sustainability Committee that advises the college president, facilities and curriculum committee. The Sustainability Committee is made up of faculty, staff and administrators with each meeting drawing about 20 members. The Sustainability Committee includes two seats for students, however students have yet to become involved in the committee.

In an interview with Barry Maxwell, a leading faculty member on the Sustainability Committee and the former faculty advisor of the student sustainability club, he described the Sustainability Committee as the major force in developing support for sustainable practices and curriculum at Whatcom. For example, Whatcom recently established an environmental general education requirement that students

must meet before graduation by taking a class from a multi-disciplinary range of classes focusing on sustainability.

The students sustainability club sees highs and lows in involvement from quarter to quarter and is usually kept alive by a passionate faculty advisor. The sustainability club had acquired a garden plot in the Cordata area a few miles from campus and has held events like beach cleanups in the past.

### **2.3 Contacts and Meetings**

In speaking with Maxwell about the major barriers to student involvement in campus sustainability, he cited the lack of a mass communication system among enrolled students and haphazard marketing for events and programs. Currently, it is hard to reach out and inform students about sustainability activities on campus.

He also cited certain student body characteristics that make student involvement in campus sustainability a challenge:

- ◇ First, students do not attend community college for a long enough period of time to become significantly involved in any campus issues.
- ◇ Secondly, the campus clears out after a certain point in the school day after students go home and its extremely difficult to draw them back to campus for events.

Inter-campus collaboration is easier on the faculty and administrator level as the success of the Sustainability Committee shows. However, student to student sustainability relations between Whatcom and Western is limited by Whatcom's sporadic student interest and involvement from quarter to quarter.

### **2.4 On-Campus Research/Observations**

As a Western student interested in collaborating with Whatcom students on sustainability issues, I attended Whatcom's Activities Fair and joined the Sustainability Club's table. I was the only one at the table. This was a testament to the extreme lack of sustained student club involvement from quarter to quarter. As students wandered by each club's booth, they would only inspect them from a distance. It was rare that I saw a student enthusiastically walk up to a booth interested in learning more. As I reached out to students asking if they were interested in sustainability few responded.

At the Activities Fair also I took some time visit other clubs' tables and to introduce myself to club leaders to ask them about the success and challenges their club faced. The resounding insight I received was to market club events or programs via word of mouth and that the most active Whatcom clubs put on only one or two big annual events a year. Anything beyond that clubs have a hard time maintaining student involvement.

### **2.5 Student Contacts**

In my research, I met two students who are passionate about sustainability on Whatcom's campus. They described themselves to me as the only ones involved in sustainability club, however they seemed excited about collaborating with students involved in Western's environmental clubs. They were excited about the potential of

getting ideas from other environmental clubs and feeding off of the student sustainability energy that already exists on Western's campus.

## 2.6 Whatcom Sustainability Committee

Attending Whatcom's Sustainability Committee November meeting was very encouraging; I felt like I was at the hub of all sustainability efforts on Whatcom's campus. With upwards of 20 faculty, staff and administrators with one student in attendance, I was present in their dialog about sustainable campus operations and event planning. Whatcom currently is implementing a composting program campus-wide and taking measures to reduce their water usage. Additionally, each quarter the Sustainability Committee plans one campus-wide student sustainability event whether it is an environmental documentary screening or a zero waste barbeque.

As the committee brainstormed for event ideas, the student in attendance mentioned that this meeting was the first time that he heard of the measures the institution was taking to green the campus. Other than seeing a compost bin pop up here and a random poster there, he was surprised and excited to hear that so much was actually happening. *In heeding that piece of information offered by a student, I suggested that the committee plan an event where they inform the student body about the sustainability practices being implemented on campus and give them an opportunity to get involved.* To my delight, the committee ran with that suggestion.

## Case Studies

In addition to my on-campus research and interviews, I sought out other community colleges with well-developed sustainability programs and consistent student involvement. I connected with the director and founder of the Sustainability Office at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon. I asked her about how Lane's program got to its current point, the barriers she faced in developing the program and asked for her insight and opinion on Whatcom's situation.

### 3.1 Lane Community College, Eugene OR

Lane Community College has a well-established on-campus Sustainability Office, a Sustainability and Learning Committee, a Sustainability Group for student involvement in implementing sustainable practices on campus, a Learning Garden and multiple environmental clubs with high levels of involvement including a Green Chemistry Club. In talking with Jennifer Hayward, the director and founder of Lane's Sustainability Office, I asked her about how Lane got to its current state as a commuter college campus community energized around environmental issues with considerable student involvement in campus sustainability.

Hayward emphasized that faculty involvement was crucial in inspiring student involvement in sustainability issues. Lane instituted a service-learning program where students must complete 10 hours of volunteerism in order to pass a class. This requirement provides the incentive for students to get involved in the Learning Garden or work on a project through the Sustainability Office, for example. Hayward said that

the service-learning requirement provides enough incentive get students over the initial apathy hump of getting involved in an on-campus activity, ultimately giving students an opportunity to become genuinely passionate about something. For instance, Hayward mentioned that the on-campus Learning Garden grew out of a service-learning project that students wanted to stay involved in and develop further after they completed their volunteer hours.

Faculty involvement is the theme that runs through the initial stages leading to the successful establishment of student involvement in sustainability issues on Lane's campus. Hayward pointed back to faculty involvement in the success of an on-campus event such as a film screening or guest speaker. When professors offered extra credit to their classes for attending the event, more students showed up.

Sustainability-focused curriculum was also a key piece in getting students involved in sustainability issues. With a varied environmental studies or sciences program, students get a chance to become educated and passionate about a certain subject. These classes get the students wanting to get involved, Hayward said.

When I asked Hayward about how Lane combats the highs and lows in student involvement from quarter to quarter she recommended having canned projects in the Sustainability Office just waiting for an interested to student to come along and take it off the shelf. She acknowledged that the short amount of time students spend on campus each day and students' inconsistent presence in the campus community from quarter to quarter were significant challenges in getting students involved in campus sustainability. However, with a Sustainability Office in place and service-learning requirements keeping students coming into the office looking for a place to volunteer, the flow of students remains predictable.

*Talking with Hayward about the challenges and successes her campus has faced confirmed that the issues Whatcom faces are typical and can be overcome. The interview illuminated some potential avenues of action to inspire more student involvement on campus.*

### 3.2 Potential Case Studies and Additional Resources

Hayward also recommended a list of other community colleges with successful sustainability offices and student involvement. That list can be found below and links to their sustainability offices can be found in the resources section. Hayward also informed me that she coordinates a monthly conference call of community college employees interested in furthering sustainability on their campuses. Furthermore, Lane hosted the first Conference on Sustainability for Community Colleges. More information on each of these resources can be found in the resources section.

- 3.2.1 Los Angeles Community College District
- 3.2.2 Butte College; Oroville, California
- 3.2.3 Santa Fe College; Gainesville, Florida
- 3.2.4 Delta College; University Center, Michigan
- 3.2.5 Finger Lakes Community College; Canandaigua, New York
- 3.2.6 Chandler Gilbert Community College; Chandler, Arizona



## Research and Analysis

### 4.1 Common Themes in Research

Throughout my research I have identified *three themes of challenges* that need to be addressed in order for successful, sustained inter-campus collaboration between Western Washington University and Whatcom Community College to take place.

- 1) First, in seeking to collaborate with community college students, *an event planner must plan events in line with the characteristics of the students.* Knowledge of the student body's characteristics and needs will bring the inter-campus collaborator one step closer to planning a successful interface between university and commuter college students. *The most important characteristics of community college students one must take into account are:*
  - a. **Characteristic 1:** *The commuting characteristic of the community colleges.* A successful event would be planned during the day around lunchtime when there is an optimum amount of students are on campus or a successful event would provide an extremely enticing incentive to draw commuter students back to campus for a second time in one day.
  - b. **Characteristic 2:** *The inconsistency of the community college student's presence on campus long term.* Community college students may take a quarter off, only take one class a quarter or enroll in online classes, lending that student to an inconsistent presence on campus. To overcome the challenge of this inconsistency, make personal contact with students by presenting to classrooms, following up with connections made during outreach, at an event or at a club meeting and, generally, be very intentional about maintaining contact with students because you never know when you will "run into" them again.
- 2) The second theme I identified is that *students tend to become involved in an on-campus opportunity once they have had the chance to learn about and become genuinely interested in that subject area by taking a class or attending an informational meeting.* Energetic involvement usually follows introductory education and knowledge. This may seem like a blatantly obvious finding, but if a community college campus is mostly comprised of Running Start (high school) students, first generation college students and people of varying ages returning to school after years away, these groups of people may not know what Sustainability Club does or why they would be interested in getting involved.

In my experience, many community college students are usually very enthusiastic in learning more about a potential area of interest. They may not be at the point of knowing everything about environmental activism, for example, but they are excited about learning more. *This is the point*

*where the inter-campus collaborator must meet community college students. Just because they don't already have a well-developed passion for a certain subject doesn't mean they don't want to develop that potential passion.*

**Action:** Therefore, someone coming into the community college setting looking to collaborate on sustainability issues must be mindful to keep collaboration open and accessible to people who are still seeking and testing the waters. Be careful not to exclude or alienate people because they aren't fully up to speed on what you're talking about; they could turn out to be your most passionate and dedicated contributor once they are up to speed.

- 3) Finally, the third theme I see amongst campus sustainability efforts is that *faculty involvement comes before, leads and, sometimes even drags student sustainability involvement along from quarter to quarter.* Of the institutions I talked to, no campus had problems finding faculty to become involved with sustainability efforts. It seems fairly characteristic that it is easier to inspire faculty excitement and involvement on inter-campus sustainability issues. However, how does that energy transfer to the student level? *A passionate faculty member is the key to energetic student involvement on campus sustainability issues.* Whether these faculty members offer sustainability-focused classes, serve as a club advisor or simply offer extra credit for volunteering at or attending an on-campus sustainability event, they are the vital connection point for community college students to take action on their potential interests.

**Action:** Successful inter-campus collaboration utilizes faculty to provide consistent guidance and direction for a club, require students to get involved in some way or, at least to disseminate information to students.

## Conclusion

### 5.1 Three Avenues of Action

In light of these findings, I suggest three avenues for action in establishing successful inter-institutional collaboration between Western Washington University and Whatcom Community College.

- 1) First, Whatcom student sustainability leaders should be invited to and included in Western's environmental events, especially networking and collaboration focused events such as the environmental club summits. Whatcom student's involvement in these existing events will forge a personal connection between student environmental leaders on both campuses while inspiring and giving Whatcom students ideas to take back to their campus.
- 2) Second, to inspire more student involvement in sustainability issues at Whatcom (the current limiting factor to inter-campus student collaboration) faculty should require service learning hours, volunteerism or, at least, give students extra credit for volunteering for an environmental organization or attending a sustainability related event. In establishing this incentive, more students will overcome the initial apathy toward involvement and begin to develop their own genuine interest in sustainability issues.
- 3) Finally, an inter-campus student sustainability event should be planned by Western and Whatcom students and held at Whatcom. This event would transfer some of Western students' "green energy" to Whatcom's campus, serve as a highly visible event to reach out to more students and provide a venue for involved students to collaborate and develop working relationships with students from other campuses.

### 5.2 Specific Recommendations

I recommend that the *Sustainability Committee continue to plan a campus-wide sustainability event each quarter. However, by the 2010-2011 school year the Sustainability Committee should be actively working with members of the student sustainability club to plan these events*. If there are no active members in Sustainability Club, the committee's sustainability events should be focused on recruiting and educating students on campus sustainability opportunities.

I also strongly recommend that all the professors who teach sustainability-related classes immediately form a network and stay informed about the campus sustainability events happening on Whatcom and Western's campuses in order to offer their students extra credit for attending these events. First off, the faculty sustainability network could be as simple as an email network between professors. However, by the 2010-2011 school year, this network of Whatcom sustainability educators should be meeting regularly to discuss the implementation of a service-learning requirement in certain classes. Whatcom has a perfect opportunity with their acquisition of the Cordata garden plot to implement a service-learning program to develop a learning garden program much like Western's Outback garden and generate student

interest in sustainable agriculture (more information about the Outback in the resources section).

Additionally, I strongly recommend that administrators at Whatcom work to develop a central communication network among students, faculty and staff as soon as possible. If every student had a school email address much like Western students have ([lastname@whatcom.ctc.edu](mailto:lastname@whatcom.ctc.edu)) the Whatcom student body would be much more unified and informed because they would regularly receive information about campus events. I recommend that the campus technology office make this its top priority working to implement this by the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year at the latest.

In working to overcome the haphazard communication among the college and students, I recommend that Whatcom administrators work to streamline a publicity system for marketing events and sharing information with the general campus community. This could take the form of the Information Office maintaining and regulating several bulletin boards. This could even take the form of a Publicity Center where clubs, committees and offices submit their events to a central location that maintains bulletin boards, digital signage, an online campus-wide events calendar and even designs and prints posters and other forms of publicity for events. However, at the very least, more bulletin boards and communication spaces need to be created and the Information Office or a similar office must be put in charge of maintaining these spaces.

Finally, I recommend that curriculum planners at Whatcom and Western begin to explore the option of opening the class ESTU: 471 Campus Sustainability Planning Studio to Whatcom students. As curriculum committees have many levels from which to acquire approval, a decision should be made by September of the 2011-2012 school year. Opening this Western class to Whatcom students would promote action-oriented collaboration between Western and Whatcom students or, at the very least, energize and equip Whatcom students to pursue campus sustainability projects on their own campus. Another route would be to create a Campus Sustainability Planning Studio on Whatcom's campus. This would create a positive feedback loop with students learning more about campus sustainability working directly on projects benefitting their own campus and building excitement for campus sustainability efforts.

## Future Works

In continuing this project, I would hope to conduct similar research at Bellingham Technical College and Northwest Indian College. A project simply focusing on the relevant inter-campus connection points at each institutions and recommendations for how to increase inter-campus sustainability collaboration between two specific institutions is incredibly helpful. Ultimately, I envision sustainability collaboration and system of support between students and faculty of all 4 institutions. However, someone needs to research and understand how best to connect the parties from each institution.

To build on the research presented here, the next researcher should focus on spending time at Whatcom to make more contacts with campus sustainability advocates and Whatcom students passionate about sustainability. These personal connects teach you the most.

To learn more about the Whatcom student body, spend sometime on campus surveying students to gauge their interest in campus sustainability. A poll would be beneficial to understanding what Whatcom students would like to see on their campus. More recycling and composting? Sustainability events? More sustainability-focused classes?

In developing a survey, ask students to rate the different areas campus sustainability (campus operations, education/academic, student to student events) in order to see where their preferences lie. Ask questions like:

1. Would you rather go to an event or to a club meeting?
2. Would you rather see more recycling on campus or go to a student sustainability event?

The goal of these questions should be to see how Whatcom student would like to get involved in campus sustainability, what kind of opportunities they would prefer and *how* to plan programs that overcome the barriers to involvement. What do the students themselves recommend? We don't have to guess. Just ask.

Case studies are so important because they highlight areas and ideas you would never have considered otherwise. So much can be learned from what other institutions are doing and how they have overcome challenges. In continuing this research, prioritize talking to the director of other community college sustainability offices.

I would also have like to explore which comes first on a campus, the student sustainability energy or the on-campus sustainability office. One inspires the other. The case studies and talking to other experienced people will inform how a campus sustainability office is founded on a college campus. What are the factors that inspire and lead to the establishment of such an office?

Does the faculty and the administration will get more engaged when students are more engaged? Is the establishment of sustainability as a practical guiding value of an institution the result of a trickle up process from students into the institution?

## Works Cited

Pollick, Michael. "What Is a Commuter College?" *WiseGEEK: clear answers for common questions*. Web. 28 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-commuter-college.htm>>.

## Resource Section

Lane Community College – Sustainability Office

<http://www.lanecc.edu/sustainability/index.html>

Sustainability Coordinator - Jennifer Hayward

Phone: (541) 463-5594

E-mail: [haywardj@lanecc.edu](mailto:haywardj@lanecc.edu)

*Contact Jennifer Hayward regarding the monthly community college campus sustainability conference call.*

Community College Sustainability Office Sites

Butte College; Oroville, California

<http://www.butte.edu/sustainability/>

Mimi Riley, 530-895-2497; [rileyme@butte.edu](mailto:rileyme@butte.edu)

Santa Fe College; Gainesville, Florida

<http://www.sfcollege.edu/sustainability/>

Julie Garrett, 352-395-5430; [julie.garrett@sfcc.edu](mailto:julie.garrett@sfcc.edu)

Delta College; University Center, Michigan

<http://www.delta.edu/sustainability.aspx>

Linda Petee, 989-686-9209; [lindapetee@delta.edu](mailto:lindapetee@delta.edu)

Finger Lakes Community College; Canandaigua, New York

<http://www.flcc.edu/green/>

Kim Babcock, [babcocka@flcc.edu](mailto:babcocka@flcc.edu)

Chandler Gilbert Community College; Chandler, Arizona

<http://www.cgc.maricopa.edu/adminservices/community-new/sustainability/Pages/sustainability.aspx>

Pushpa Ramakrishna, 480-732-7219

[pushpa.ramakrishna@cgcmail.maricopa.edu](mailto:pushpa.ramakrishna@cgcmail.maricopa.edu)

Los Angeles Community College District  
<http://www.laccdbuildsgreen.org/>

National Conference on Sustainability for Community Colleges:  
<http://www.lanec.edu/sustainability/conferences.html>

The Outback – Outdoor Experiential Learning Program  
<http://outback.as.wvu.edu/>  
Matia Jones: [matiaindigo@hotmail.com](mailto:matiaindigo@hotmail.com)

NWHESC- The Northwest Higher Education Sustainability Consortium  
<http://www.wvu.edu/sustain/initiatives/InterCampusCollaboration/index.shtml>

Program Contact: George Pierce, Special Assistant for Sustainability  
Email: [George.Pierce@wvu.edu](mailto:George.Pierce@wvu.edu)

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