Building Student Leadership Through Networks: Connecting Higher Education Institutions Through Behavior Change Projects

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Summary

The Environmental Student Leaders Action Network (ESLAN) was a collaboration of students and faculty mentors working on campus behavior change sustainability projects from five colleges in Hennepin County, MN. The goal of this work was to improve campus sustainability behaviors and also to create an intercampus network of student leaders. Each campus team designed and implemented a project centered around one of the following themes: climate change, waste reduction, recycling, water protection, or natural areas. ESLAN came together for four meetings over a six-month period to discuss and learn about implementing behavior change projects successfully from experts in the field. These community building sessions involved peer-to-peer learning with students giving each other feedback, along with time to brainstorm and troubleshoot about different aspects of project implementation. Each team concluded their project by surveying participants and presenting their findings to the ESLAN group and a representative from Hennepin County. Funding for this project was provided by Hennepin County through the Green Partners environmental education program. The University of Minnesota’s Institute on the Environment provide project coordination.

Minneapolis Community & Technical College (MCTC) - TEAM 1

Focus: Climate Change

Goal: Draw attention to the carbon footprint associated with the daily food choices people make, particularly with transportation related with food.

Program: Distributed mugs instead of disposable mugs.

Program: Develop communication tools for a new campus-wide composting program.

North Hennepin Community College

Focus: Natural Areas

Goal: Bring attention to the benefits of spending time outdoors.

Program: Developed Take a Hike campaign, with videos, maps, and hosting group hikes and built connection with Exercise Science to motivate students to utilize the on-campus nature trail.

Augsburg College

Focus: Recycling/waste reduction

Goal: Start recycling personal and oral care items across campus using the company TerraCycle.

Program: Developed a recycling pilot program for residential and commuter students to recycle difficult-to-recycle items, such as toothbrushes and cosmetics.

University of Minnesota

Focus: Waste Reduction

Goal: Motivate students to reduce their waste by using reusable mugs instead of disposal.

Program: Distributed reusable mugs to participants and asked them to post their experience on social media.

Impact of Behavior Change Projects

1) In total, approximately 3,800 people were reached through the behavior change projects.
2) 301 students actively participated in the various behavior changes projects led by the six student teams.
3) Between the three campuses focused on waste reduction, approximately 70% stated in post-participation surveys that they will reduce their waste because of what they learned during the campaign.
4) Of the two campuses working to educate those on campus of how their food decisions impact their carbon footprint, 70% stated they would continue to reduce their carbon footprint through food choices because of the campaign.
5) The campus working on motivating students to spend time in natural areas found that 78% of those surveyed would spend more time outside because of the behavior change project participation.

Our Approach

- Participation in the Minneapolis 2015 AASHE conference
- Education from experts in the field
- Peer learning
- Cohort and community environment
- Student leadership development
- Implementation of behavior change framework (Community-Based Social Marketing, Doug MacKenzie-Mohr) (Figure 1)
- Surveyed participants to assess impact of ESLAN projects

Figure 1: Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM) behavior change framework that was utilized by each team

Minnesota Community & Technical College - TEAM 2

Focus: Climate Change

Goal: Ask those that incorporate meat in their diet to chose one day each week to eat meatless meals in order to draw attention to the impacts of animal agriculture on climate change.

Program: Held Meatless Monday campaign with weekly recipes and grocery lists.

Lessons Learned by Student Leaders

Behavior Change

1. Social media measurement of behavior change is limited. Additional measurements and connections to participants are needed.
2. Personal connection and engaging prospective participants with interactive activity is important to understand barriers and benefits to changing the specified behavior.

Student Leadership

1. More frequent meetings with the larger cohort of Hennepin County Colleges would have been beneficial for brainstorming and identifying barriers that individual groups may not have thought of on their own.
2. Many teams reported that they would have liked additional training in team management in order to overcome challenging group dynamics.
3. Students, faculty, and staff connections helped in developing project ideas.
4. Detailed timeline to project deadlines, provided early and often, assists students in managing conflicting academic schedules within the individual teams.