Campus Operations and Academics: An Interesting Case of Community-Based Research

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Introduction:

As another phase in an ongoing collaboration between the WSU Energy and Sustainability Office (ESO), Facilities Management (FM) and me, my Environment & Sociology class (SOC 3300) is partnering with them in conducting a community-based research (CBR) project this spring. Replicating a study conducted in 2014, we are exploring perceptions and attitudes about water, and its use and conservation at WSU, by conducting focus groups with a variety of WSU stakeholders. After analyzing the data, students will present their findings to ESO and FM, both in oral and written form.

The success of the original project allowed student researchers to present their findings at research conferences, and they published their research report in ERGO. The research led to substantial changes in how ESO/FM works on water sustainability. We are replicating the study to explore whether perspectives and attitudes about water at WSU have changed in the last 6 years. In addition to developing research skills and experience, the student researchers are learning course materials at a deeper level while discovering a diversity of perceptions about natural resources.

CBR benefits both student and community partners. It allows students to collaborate with community partners. Listening to community members’ perspectives allows scholars to see assets and strengths of both community partners and research participants. The best situations for community engaged learning allow students to “do meaningful work, exercise initiative, have important responsibilities, engage in varied tasks, and work directly with practitioners or other community members, and where their work is clearly connected to the course content.” This project provides these opportunities for students.

Research suggests Utah will experience increasing water stress in coming years. Demand for water will rise as the population grows, while supplies will become scarcer due to climate change.3-4 WSU must work toward water sustainability in the same ways they have become known for their work on other aspects of sustainability. By collaborating with ESO and FM in this work, students are being able to see the value and usefulness of their research contributions to this effort.

The start of the collaboration: 2014 study and outcomes

Prior to the 2014 study, WSU had been making improvements inside buildings with upgrades in plumbing, fixtures, and metering, and on the grounds with some xeriscaping projects. However, FM had only incomplete usage data and no baseline for tracking progress. Additionally, there was no overall plan for water management, including conservation, for the campus.

ESO and FM also lacked information on how the campus community perceived water issues, whether stakeholders were aware of recent improvements, and whether they saw campus water conservation as a need or priority. Dan Bedford, Geography, and I partnered with ESO and FM on the community-based research project to fill these gaps.

The project fostered collaboration between campus operations and academics. We collaborated on research design. ESO staff presented background information on WSU and water to my class. The class conducted a series of focus groups with campus stakeholders, analyzed the data, and presented their research findings to our community partners from ESO and FM.

Just hours after research findings were presented, ESO began including water when presenting on sustainability to campus audiences, showing student researchers the difference their work had made on the same day they presented their findings.

In 2016 Jacob Cain, Director of Operations, and I presented at AASHE on the benefits from our collaboration for both campus operations and academics. My students had greatly benefited from learning course concepts at a deeper level, the opportunity to develop skills in qualitative research, and being able to list the experience on grad school and job applications.

ESO increased educational efforts on water conservation issues and WSU’s progress. WSU made water conservation and sustainability a higher priority, leading to the creation of a Water Conservation Specialist position.

Since 2016, this specialist has created a Water Council, drafted a Water Action Plan, implemented a Stormwater Management Plan, and done much to improve efforts in WSU’s irrigation infrastructure and practices.

In further collaboration, we decided to replicate the 2014 study. We want to see whether there have been changes in campus stakeholders’ perceptions of water conservation and what WSU is doing with water, along with other water-related concerns.

The 2020 study: Still underway despite shutdown

Again I collaborated with ESO and FM on research design. They provided me with updates on WSU’s water management and conservation, and presented to my Environment and Society class. The class was going to conduct eight focus groups with different WSU stakeholder groups, but the campus shutdown occurred the week before they were finished. Data analysis from the five focus groups completed is now under way, and student researchers will present preliminary findings orally to ESO on 4/15/20 (using a Zoom meeting). This will be followed by a written report of these preliminary findings.

Three more focus groups will be conducted Fall 2020 by student researchers, including two research assistants working with the project this semester, and students from the class who wish to continue with the study (for special projects credit).

Despite the challenges with the campus shutdown, students are developing research skills in qualitative data collection, coding, and analysis. Other skills include oral and written dissemination of research findings.

Two students are currently working on a presentation proposal to present the project at the AASHE conference in fall; students may also choose to submit their written findings for publication.

In addition to the oral presentation of research findings and written report from the class, our community research partners will receive expanded findings as they are available. This will be useful in a number of ways, including providing the Water Conservation Specialist increased information to be incorporated into the WSU Water Action Plan.

Conclusions:

The ongoing collaboration between WSU Operations and Academics continues to be effective and useful for both. For students, not only does it benefit those working on the project, the collaboration has provided a valuable example of the difference student research can make. ESO/FM benefit from the research findings, and engaging in class presentations provides an education opportunity, and provides staff with practice in presenting to not-technical audiences.

Even early in the data analysis process I can see the study will provide useful information for ESO/FM about some shifts in campus culture where water sustainability is concerned, including a significant degree of stakeholder buy-in for conservation measures. They will also hear about issues some stakeholders consider as problematic, and suggestions on how they can better provide information to the campus community.

My experience with this collaboration is that it is a win for students, a win for ESO/FM, and a win for the campus more broadly. Additionally, despite the increased workload projects like this generate, it is a win for me in that I get to be a part of this incredibly beneficial work. I would encourage my colleagues to consider whether they may find similar benefits from similar collaborations.

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