Title: General Education Sustainability Class

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Class: ENVS 4100 – Appropriate Technology and Sustainability – Ecological Design:
       The Campus as a Living Laboratory

Instructor: Dr. Harold Glasser; Associate Professor

Issue:
In the rapidly changing economy our nation faces, it is necessary for individuals seeking a higher education to compliment their disciplinary training with expertise in order to learn integrative inter and trans-disciplinary problem solving skills. This notion is reflected in the sustainability reports of many leading companies like Nike, Interface, Steelcase, and Dow Chemical.

Our group focused on WMU’s General Education Curriculum. We chose this topic because we believe there is a tremendous opportunity to build sustainability/ecological literacy into the General Education Curriculum. Our focus was to explore student environmental/ecological literacy, assess interest in a new General Education course, and evaluate what other universities have done.

Clearly many people believe environmental issues will have profound impacts on quality of life in the U.S. and the rest of the world in the coming decades. WMU has recognized this fact and is proud to reflect that in the Goals and Missions of the University: “to advance responsible environmental stewardship”.

We wanted to evaluate and assess the extent to which WMU has promoted responsible environmental stewardship through a survey and explore the potential of creating a new general education requirement by either modifying current courses or offer new courses to help advance the goal of responsible environmental stewardship.

What We Did:
We initially turned to other universities in order to see what innovative approaches they have done. The University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC has taken the approach of “branding” themselves as a sustainable campus. They teach students to “acknowledge their obligations as global citizens, and strive to secure a sustainable and equitable future for all” (UBC Mission Statement). We also looked at a university that would be a little closer to home. Aquinas College, located in Grand Rapids, is the first University to offer an undergraduate course in Environmental Business Management. Aquinas and also has a Masters of Management Degree with a concentration in Sustainable Business.
After learning how the curriculum can be changed at a university wide level through Wendy Ford, Associate Dean for College of Arts and Sciences, we discovered that General Education classes can only be implemented in the fall semester. The catalog for the Fall 2007 semester has already been printed, so the next available time for a General Education course to be introduced is the Fall 2008 semester.

We learned that in order to change curriculum four major things need to be done:

• Campus wide dialogue on adding the course
• Faculty support to teach the course
• Administrative support
• Incentives to promote a cross college, interdisciplinary collaboration and cooperation (faculty development opportunities)

Our group created a survey designed to gauge students’ basic environmental knowledge and perception of environmental issues. The survey asked questions on U.S. and world population, climate change, human impact on Earth, environmental business practices, opinion-based questions measuring their concerns and interests in these issues, interest to take a course on sustainability, and how well they thought WMU models environmentally responsible stewardship in its curriculum, operation, and facilities management. The results show 50% of the people surveyed didn’t know how much energy the U.S. consumes. Also, 41% didn’t know what type of energy our region uses. 83% do not know what the expected world population will be in 2050. 51% don’t feel that WMU has taught them sufficient information about environmental issues. 62% said that they would be interested in taking a course at WMU about environmental and sustainability issues.

Recommendations:
If WMU was to offer and promote a new general education course on sustainability it would likely increase recruitment and retention, increase interest in pursuing a double major or minor, foster faculty development through inter and intra college collaboration, give WMU recognition for striving to educate students on critical issues, and better prepare students for a volatile, dynamic, and increasingly demanding work environment.

One possible strategy is to provide incentives to each college to choose one person who will collaborate in an interdisciplinary, cross college, team-taught class. It could be taught as a large lecture with small break-out sessions. This could bring both faculty and students from the entire university together. A summer workshop to facilitate support this class could be initiated right here on campus by existing faculty.

This is a unique opportunity for WMU to better serve current and incoming students. We would like to ask for a summer research opportunity to create a more sophisticated survey, build on the preliminary data, and gain further knowledge about student and faculty awareness and interest.