Summer 2016: SSF/SSG Student Report, WeSustain Assessment, Building Dashboards, etc.

Introduction:

The SSF and SSG programs have been a facet of WMU’s sustainability culture for 6 years, and given that no major review of this program had been performed up to this time, I was assigned the challenge of coordinating and coagulating a diverse and largely non-centralized amount of information.

Performing this review was an interesting challenge; as a new employee at the OfS and past WeSustain intern, I was given a crash course introduction to all of the programs that the OfS manages, full access to all data, materials, and reports, and then subsequently assigned the task of assessing all of the literature relating to the SSF at WMU. I became an expert on the subject by reviewing the entirety of the documentation that exists on our green fee, the sustainability surveys that have been conducted since 2013, other universities’ green fee programs and implementation schemes, as well as the documentation of past SSGs and OfS student employee research. Ultimately, my learning process and challenges are reflected in my recommendations—to ensure the successful stewardship of SSF monies, the OfS must revise some operations, retire some programs, and begin to pilot programs that target students in their first year of attending WMU, so as to hopefully create student leaders that will work with the OfS to create a campus culture of sustainability while simultaneously promoting themselves and their actions as a sustainability champion during their time on campus and in their lives after.

Among other duties this summer, I was also called on to assist in the documentation and observation of the Building Dashboard system that we have in nine campus buildings. I frequently took trips around campus to inspect the monitors, identify problems with the backend software, and then monitor the online-portion of the system as well. This resulted in updating the documentation of the dashboards, which will help anyone in the future who is trying to do research on the efficacy of the dashboards in terms of energy consumption and awareness. The highlight of this small project was identifying a board that had lost its software-license, and contacting Lucid, the company that runs the backend system, where they were able to remotely re-active the board and get our monitoring system back up and running.

I also assisted the Office internship coordinator, Laura Donders, with compiling assessment results from past WeSustain internship cohorts. This included creating an excel file to quickly calculate averages and differences between cohorts, locating and analyzing past scores, and creating a rubric to assist with the grading of future assessments.
I also created an orientation document for the office, which will act as a quick introduction to the diverse array of office programs that new employees should know about. Due to the immense variety of programs that the Office for Sustainability manages, and given that many of these programs exist in a decentralized location, it can often take an employee months to have a firm grasp of all the programs under our management. This document will hopefully provide a firm background into those programs, so when an employee does finally come into physical contact with one of these diverse programs, they will be able to quickly grasp how that program fits into the greater goals of our mission, to create a better quality of life for all.

Methods and Results:

All of these projects were accomplished with the significant input of Dr. Glasser and Jeff Speolstra. By removing obstacles and answering countless questions for me, they acted as a pair of servant-leaders, both directing and assisting my projects in a very efficient and responsible manner. The end result of my SSF report will be published on the OfS website at some point in the future as a companion piece to the Administrative report that OfS leadership will create, illustrating the separate perspectives that exist on the SSF and SSG programs.

Commentary, Reflection, and Next Steps:

For the WeSustain internship assessments, the creation of a solid rubric and a better filing system for the storage of assessments will be a huge quality of life improvement for current and future coordinators, and will establish a clear cut expectation for future coordinators to maintain and improve upon the systems we have established.

The Building Dashboard program is in a very good place, but not much is being done with the incredible energy usage data that we have been gathering for the past years. In order to justify the costs of these dashboards and the software that makes them function, we should invest more time and energy into using these tools to reduce our energy usage, if not by encouraging behavior change then at least by using them to identify inefficient buildings and to incrementally plan upgrades or rectify oversights that may have occurred years ago. These dashboards are a wonderful tool that truly add to the transparency of our university, and their effective reference points can be used to identify certain areas in our energy infrastructure that can be leveraged into something cleaner and even more wholesome.

The SSF and SSG student report will be filed on the Sustainability website at some point in the future, and will hopefully aid administration with the management and future direction of the grant program that offers incredible opportunities to the sustainability champions that will influence the direction that our campus goes, now and in the future.