Short-Term Internships In Higher Education: Creating Ambassadors For Sustainability Through Leadership And Experiential Learning

Nicolette Ledbury, Jamie L. Hirsh, & Harold Glasser
Western Michigan University

Internship Overview
In alignment with the Western Michigan University (WMU) Strategic Plan, which states, “WMU supports a culture of sustainability by modeling practices and policies that result in increased flexibility to respond to economic, environmental, and social challenges,” the WMU Office for Sustainability (OS) created the Wesustain Internship Program in fall 2014. The program was developed following review and analysis of research on core competencies in learning for sustainability, existing sustainability internship programs, and leadership training. The goal of the Wesustain Internship Program is to be a catalyst for change and to contribute to the development of new leaders who can think and act sustainably.

Program Development Methodology
The evidence-based approach to the development of the Wesustain Internship Program incorporated two elements -
1) a best-practice review of existing university sustainability internship programs, and
2) an examination of the literature on, and related to, the development of learning outcomes and core competencies in learning for sustainability (US) (see Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1997; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2009; Spalding, Williams, & Wise, 2014; Sterling, Maxey, & Luna (Eds.), 2013; Wiek, Wittycombe, & Redman, 2011).

Next, we began to draft potential learning outcomes and goals for the new internship program. These learning outcomes would be reflected in internship activities and experiences, as well as the “assignments” or measures that would be used to accurately assess the knowledge and skills gained by each participant over the course of the semester. New materials were then evaluated in reference to the University’s statement of official goals as outlined in the WMU Strategic Plan (Western Michigan University, 2012). A final draft of the learning outcomes was used to guide the internship activities, assignments, and subsequent assessments.

Learning Outcomes
1) Students will be able to describe and discuss the consequences of their everyday actions on multiple scales (on themselves, on their communities, and on those distant from them in time and space, including nonhumans). Examples of these forms of knowledge: (a) learn the significance that nature plays in human survival and flourishing; (b) understand how seemingly small actions have profound consequences; (c) question dominant assumptions about the world and society that currently perpetuate unsustainability.
2) Students will develop a deep understanding of the coevolution and interconnectedness of all species and use this knowledge to explore human development opportunities and priorities that promote improvements in quality of life for all (especially the flourishing of nonhumans and endangered cultures).
3) Students will explore leadership strategies, model sustainable behaviors, and experiment with changing their (and potentially other’s) patterns of thinking and behavior.
4) Students will develop an understanding of the organizational goals and corresponding short- and long-term objectives that propel sustainability efforts at Western Michigan University on local, national, and global scales.
5) Students will be able to effectively articulate, through written and oral communication, their knowledge of and appreciation for complex, interconnected, and sometimes conflicting sustainability challenges across multiple perspectives.

Program Assessment & Results
The assessment process for the Wesustain Internship Program had two primary goals:
1) Assess student progress and skills gained throughout the course of the internship, and
2) Assess the efficacy of the program itself with respect to content, context, and pedagogy. The assessment process included qualitative, anecdotal notes regarding how students “performed” during and contributed to discussions, their level of involvement during internship activities, and the content of their journal entries. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected on a pre/post assessment.

Pre/post assessment results are listed below:

Discussion
Overall, we found the new Wesustain Internship Program to be a great success. The quantitative data shows that our students’ sustainability knowledge and skills were enhanced substantially (an average of 19.5% to an average of 27.35 postassessment). In addition, the quality and quantity of viable applicants rose nearly 30% from fall 2013 to spring of 2015. The greatest qualitative successes are exemplified by the ever-increasing community connections with local businesses/organizations/nonprofits and the continued involvement with sustainability initiatives by Wesustain Internship Program alumni.

References