Sustainability education – brainstorming meeting highlights. 13 November 2012

Although this was not an official meeting of the UMC Sustainability Committee, there are some items of interest to the UMC community which pertain to sustainability education. There is a system-wide Sustainability Committee co-chaired by Pam Wheelock, VP for Operations, and Jacquie Johnson, Chancellor at UMN. UMC representatives have included Linda Kingery, student – Lauren Snively, and Dan Svedarsky. The committee is organized into various task forces. The Student Engagement is co-chaired by Linda Kingery and Troy Goodnough from UMM and they organized a weekend student conference at UMD in October. Svedarsky and Andrew Svec serve on the Communications task force chaired by Ann Freeman. Svedarsky also serves on the Sustainability Education task force chaired by Nick Jordan, an agronomy professor from the St. Paul campus. This inter-campus task force developed a “white paper” over the last year which outlines some broad concepts on ways of thinking about sustainability education and different initiatives that might be developed system-wide, within a campus, and between a campus and its external community. Within the white paper, Svedarsky contributed a piece about the “CommUniversity” concept and its connection to the Crookston In-Motion planning effort which UMC faculty, staff, and students have been engaged in with the Crookston community for the last year.

As a follow-up to the Sustainability Education Task Force, a group met on 13 November to consider the following central question: How can UMC better connect internally and externally around interdisciplinary, sustainability themes to assist systems thinking in our students and synergize with the U of MN system and the Crookston community? Discussion themes included:

1. Develop an action plan that could adapt and implement whatever is appropriate for our campus that would involve interdisciplinary, systems-thinking across campus to include the academic environment, facilities, and connections to the Crookston community.

2. Teamwork is an expressed priority of a university education and we do some of this in classes, but generally the "teams" are made up of students from within a discipline. How do we engage students from across disciplines; more like the real world setting?

3. Can UMC more effectively connect with, or "adopt," the community of Crookston and engage with planning efforts of one sort or another. Some of these have already commenced: GreenCorps member outreach, past Chamber of Commerce internships, involvement of UMC faculty, staff, and student in the Crookston In-Motion initiative, Nature Park development, numerous service learning projects, etc. Could we formalize some of these relationships more to give students a better idea how the real world works, a "community lab."
4. Should we revive the Sustainability Minor effort? The paperwork and approval process is close to completion, ably co-chaired by Katy Smith and Paul Aakre.

Discussion centered around these themes and the following take home points emerged:

A. Rob Proulx could not attend but offered the following:

“From my studies at UND and in reading the white paper, a few things stand out in my mind as being essential to teaching and learning of sustainability:

- a systems perspective, brought by working & learning across disciplines
- project-based learning
- connections with operations and facilities constituents within the campus community
- a regional focus, brought about by connections with community and regional stakeholders

To answer the question raised in Point 1 of your e-mail, I believe that establishing a sustainability minor will be the most effective vehicle to begin the process of formally integrating sustainability into our curriculum. However, as I’ve discussed before, I feel that past iterations of the sustainability minor were inadequate to advance this goal and are therefore unacceptable. I take issue primarily with the lack of a project-based capstone course. In my view, such a course is essential in helping students to draw connections between the coursework from the varied disciplines that constitutes the majority of the sustainability minor. As currently constructed, without such a course, the sustainability minor asks students to draw those connections largely by themselves, which is an incredibly difficult thing to do! Issues of sustainability are difficult, demand that hard decisions be made, and require a nuanced understanding of issues that cut across disciplines. I think a project-based capstone course within the sustainability minor has the greatest potential to encourage such systems thinking amongst our students, could encompass all the important points I mention above, and also relates to Points 2 and 3 in your original e-mail. In addition to working on the project, additional course activities (lectures, discussions, etc.) could be utilized to highlight connections between global sustainability issues and the regional/local issues being covered in the class.

If it is decided to proceed with establishment of the sustainability studies minor, I have a strong interest in helping to shape the program of study. Also, I would be very much interested in helping to teach a new capstone course if it becomes part of the curriculum.”

B. Other thoughts on a Sustainability Minor:

Eyad Youssef: There is a strong element of sustainability or “greenness” in corporate marketing. Eyad distributed a syllabus for a course called, Marketing Strategies for Sustainability.
Christo Robberts supported Eyad’s comment and suggested that an element of sustainability could even be included in every major due to the broad nature of the concept. We should start the discussions anew on the minor and build on the former progress.

Katy Smith co-chaired the previous effort and is willing to get the process going again. Other people willing to help on the “sustainability minor committee” include Rob Proulx, Eyad Youssef, Dan Svedarsky, and Christo Robberts.

“It should contain a lot of flexibility.”

C. Campus and community outreach/ the “CommUniversity Concept.”

Linda Kingery has been very engaged in community outreach as it pertains to sustainability and offered the following:

“I have a commitment in Warren at 4:30 tomorrow, so I cannot make the suggested Sustainability Supper work on Tuesday. I'm interested in this conversation and hope to get connected for the next steps.. As some of you know, we're using the Green Step framework as we think about how the Regional Partnership can support community efforts toward a future that improves quality of life and resilience. To that end, Tashi Gurung interviewed several community leaders in the region last summer. And, this fall Lisa Loegering has created a matrix that links courses on the Crookston campus and the 28 practices and 168 actions that are in the Green Steps framework. It is a google doc, still a work in progress, and excellent resource for thinking about our current capacity to engage communities on their priorities. Perhaps a near term step is to develop one or two service learning experiences for spring semester that are well aligned with Crookston in Motion and Green Steps. NW RSDP has [modest] resources to support pilot scale approach.”

The Crookston In-Motion planning initiative has adopted 4 Destiny Drivers and one is entitled, Sustainability as a guiding principle in community development. Guidelines include the following:

Promoting a more walkable and bikeable community with less reliance on the automobile to improve health and reduce resource use. Complete biennial assessment report.

Planning which places a priority on a vibrant community core and building “from the inside out” to strengthen a sense of community and reduce urban expansion onto good farm land.

Advocating for the production and sale of locally grown food and vegetables through urban gardening and farmer’s markets. This connects people to the land, promotes healthy eating, and stimulates the local economy. Estimate # annual participants and sales.
Celebrating our reliance on the conservation of natural resources of soil, water, plants, and wildlife through recycling, discovery park experiences and strengthening our connections to the river by fishing and water-based recreation.

Placing a priority on the retrofitting, design, and construction of housing which exemplifies forward thinking in energy efficiency, and renewable energy technologies.

D. Other sustainability related topics mentioned:

Linda Kingery and student interns continue to promote local foods and the need for a garden to be developed on campus.

Christo pointed out that local food gardens at this latitude produce a lot of goods in a short time so why not investigate the processing of this food to eat later. “We have horses and hay, why not grow mushrooms?” “Why not develop a methane digester with locally produced manure?”

Svedarsky, Kingery, Rich Connell, and Peter Phaiah have contributed to the Systemwide Sustainability Committee report for the December Board of Regent’s meeting.

Svedarsky and agency partners are investigating the prospects of using biofuels as a supplemental feedstock for the campus heating boiler with cattails as a candidate source.

Jon Foley, Director of the Institute on Environment on the TC campus and some of his colleagues will visit campus in the first week of May.