EcoReps at Illinois

Sustainability has grown to be a major issue of concern amongst college students in the United States, and Universities across the country have sought to find ways to provide an education and establish a reputation in this area. Besides the benefits to our earth, many academic institutions have realized the reputational benefits and financial benefits they can accrue by aggressively pursing sustainability. The University of Illinois has taken a major step forward in this area by adopting a Climate Action Plan seeking to achieve operational Carbon Neutrality by 2050 and committing to a variety of strategies to mitigate emissions as well as to educate students about Climate Change. It is recognized that students often learn best through peer interactions, thus many schools have established peer-to-peer sustainability education programs (often called Eco-Reps).

Student peer to peer sustainability outreach programs were first established at the University of Vermont, Tufts University and Harvard University, and have since spread across the country. Generally, these programs work in the residential areas of campus and are sponsored by a campus department (such as Recycling, Residential Life, or the campus sustainability office). A list of 50 institutions including almost every member of the Ivy League as well as public institutions such as the University of Missouri, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Kentucky can be found at <http://www.aashe.org/resources/peer2peer.php>

Student educators in such a program can offer a variety of services. First and foremost, they will be expected to model sustainable behavior for other students such as recycling, using bicycles and public transportation, minimizing their energy and resource consumption, engaging in service activities and such. They can organize floor-wide or building-wide campaigns on recycling and energy consumption, and support food-waste composting and student room weatherization programs, which will help University Housing reduce its energy consumption and overall costs. Eco-reps will be expected to connect other students with sustainability education opportunities (formal and informal), organize activities related to sustainability and an appreciation of nature, lead service activities (such as at the student farm, or campus clean-ups), and get students involved in the many campus Registered Student Organizations that work on sustainability issues. Longer term activities for Eco-reps could include working to identify operational efficiencies in Housing and Dining operations, and being responsible for establishing and caring for student vegetable gardens and or native plant restorations in proximity to residence halls.

The University of Illinois has a similar residential life program dedicated to social justice and diversity issues carried out by students known as Multi-Cultural Advocates (MAs). We believe that it is time for a similar program dedicated to sustainability issues. Two possible models for student peers exist – either a model identical to the MA system where each hall has a student with an intense commitment level (~20 hours/week), compensated through free room and board, that works with volunteers, OR a model where each hall has multiple students (~3-4 per hall) that commit ~4-5 hours a week, and is compensated by a modest semesterly stipend (~$1,500/year). Discussions have begun regarding the establishment of a sustainability living and learning community (LLC) in University Housing – the Program Director of such an LLC would be ideally placed to supervise this program.

Implementation

If authorized by University Housing, this program should be piloted this fall in two residence halls. Allen Hall has agreed to be one pilot location, and another is to be identified. Educational and training materials would be prepared over the summer by Students for Environmental Concerns, in co-operation with University Housing. Due to lack of funding at such short notice, the program will make do with volunteers this year, though attempts will be made to obtain program and training funds (not compensation) from any accessible campus source.

Interested students will be recruited and interviewed over the first half of September, and trained during weekends in the second half of September. Participating Eco-reps will begin by seeking to maximize student involvement in activities during the Campus’s first Sustainability Week (in late October). Eco-reps will be expected to meet bi-weekly to discuss their programs with each other and connect with various campus sustainability staff and organizations, and meet on alternate weeks with their Hall’s Resident Directors and other staff. Once established, participating students will be expected to organize a certain number of activities / programs per semester, as discussed above.

The next step would be to use this program as the basis for requesting grant support from the Student Sustainability Committee, in conjunction with the request being made for the Living-Learning Community. If the pilot appears successful, funds are likely to be awarded to expand this program to additional residence halls and compensate student participants. Metrics to assess the environmental impact of behavioral changes, to examine the financial impact on Housing operations and to track the changes in knowledge and awareness on sustainability issues amongst Housing residents, will need to be developed. The SSC is likely to provide funds for ~3 years, at which point they will seek to transition the program to other sources of funding. If assessments indicate that the program is contributing to financial savings for Housing that may be a potential source of revenue. Funds from foundations and donors should also be aggressively pursued.

In conclusion, we believe that the time is right for establishment of this program at the University of Illinois. Such a program would be distinctive to University Housing, as unavailable at any other Big-10 Institutions, and would be a valuable marketing tool as well. It will also be of considerable use in helping the University achieve the goals established in the Climate Action Plan.