UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

SCI Sustainable Cities Institute

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Sustainable City Year Program
University of Oregon

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In Oregon, Students Seek Key to a Sustainable City

By MICHAEL BURNHAM of Greenwire

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SALEM, Ore. -- In many cities, the rise of a shopping mall forebodes the fall of a downtown.

A Sears trades Main Street for Mall Drive. Shoppers follow in their cars and so do the automobile dealerships and furniture stores.

But Oregon's capital, which saw its downtown deteriorate when Interstate 5 and strip malls rose to the east in the 1960s, went a different direction: It built a mall downtown. A movie theater, Macy's and dozens of other Salem Center retailers continue to draw shoppers to the corner of Center and Liberty streets.

"The mall definitely helps business," said Lari DeLapp, owner of the Coffee House Café, two blocks south of the mall. "Boy, if that went away, downtown would really be hurting."

Business could be better, DeLapp concedes, but these are not ordinary times. The Great Recession manifests itself here in myriad ways: State workers adjust to "Furlough Fridays," shoppers spend less in downtown stores, and developers build fewer homes and offices.

If Salem's key to economic sustainability in the 20th century was brick-and-mortar buildings such as the mall, then what is the solution for today? Short on tax dollars, this city of 150,000 people is about to be long on ideas -- and perhaps a little paper, glue and elbow grease mixed in.

Roughly 600 University of Oregon students in 25 classes will devote 80,000 hours to Salem during the coming year. The novel program, part of the university's three-year-old Sustainable Cities Initiative, will focus on making Salem more economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

Students in architecture, planning, law, journalism and business classes will explore how Salem could nurture green business clusters, reuse industrial byproducts, connect parks with bicycle paths, redevelop brownfields and design energy-efficient municipal buildings, among other things. Just as important, the students will consider market and regulatory barriers to implementing their ideas.

"If there isn't a lot of economic activity and ability to make these kinds of substantive changes in the built environment today, then it's the perfect time to be laying out the ideas and plans for the future," contended Marc Schlossberg, a planning professor and co-director of the Sustainable Cities Initiative. "We like to call this tilling the soil."

Till today, reap tomorrow

Students will create a strategy for redeveloping land between Salem's central business district and Riverfront City Park, which lines the eastern edge of the Willamette River. The architecture, law and planning students' work will take into account the city's downtown strategic action plan, the framework for urban renewal investments.

Meanwhile, the Salem City Council is weighing whether to loan $500,000 to a team of developers to finish a high-profile tower with space for residents and retailers. The eight-story Rivers Condominiums building sits adjacent to vacant lots today, but city leaders envision a bustling riverfront neighborhood tomorrow.

"That's a key to keeping downtown vibrant," Salem City Manager Linda Norris said.

In addition to brainstorming ways to spur more downtown development, students will consider how to connect the city's parks with bicycle and pedestrian trails. Potential environmental benefits include less automobile traffic and pollution, city planners contend.

"We have a lot of good data about the number of cars that move through but not much about the bikes," said Courtney Knox, the city's lead staffer on the project.

Students will also be tasked with designing a new home for Salem's police department and redesigning a 1972 civic center as a hub for other municipal workers.

"We're looking for ways to make it more energy efficient, leaving the '70s behind, we hope," Knox explained. "The space is just not configured well for current work habits and culture."

Working on such projects will give students a comprehensive look at how a city really works, said University of Oregon architecture professor and program co-director Nico Larco.

"An architecture student starts to see how important the political process is -- that it's not just about design," Larco added.

The city will chip in about $345,000 for the university collaboration, dubbed the Sustainable City Year. Last year, students put in about 100,000 hours of work for the Portland suburb of Gresham.

Among the students' paper-and-glue models and glossy reports were plans for an energy-efficient city hall and weekday commuter rail parking lot that doubles as an outdoor market and music venue on weekends. Students also explored how this suburb of more than 100,000 people could improve pedestrian activity, redevelop a rock quarry, reduce stormwater runoff and adapt to climate change.

Greening the ivory tower

The Sustainable Cities Initiative is perhaps the most comprehensive effort by a U.S. university to infuse sustainability into its curricula and community outreach. In recent years, green chemistry, business and design classes have sprouted alongside organic gardens and recycling centers at the Univerity of Oregon's campus in Eugene and at other colleges and universities.

In Annville, Pa., for example, farmers feed their pigs food scraps from Lebanon Valley College's dining and catering services. At Meredith College, in Raleigh, N.C., students and employees buy shares in a farm and receive organic produce.

Higher-education officials contend that the sustainability movement is a new twist on an age-old mission.

"We're putting the public back in public university," said Robert Young, a University of Oregon planning professor and Sustainable Cities Initiative co-director.

"By very definition, sustainability is looking at environmental-, economic- and equity-based public interests," Young explained. "It's the historical role of the public university."

Karen Arabas, a professor of environmental science at Willamette University in downtown Salem, said private schools such as hers share that mission. She points to the 168-year-old institution's motto: "Not unto ourselves alone are we born."

"We have a strong sense of service on campus, and sustainability transcends every field," Arabas added. "When students graduate,

these are some of the skills and knowledge they'll need in the world, whether they go into law, business or medicine."

Willamette -- which topped a 2008 National Wildlife Federation ranking of U.S. schools that engage in sustainability activities -- uses its Center for Sustainable Communities to foster campus-community collaboration. The 2,600-student university began hosting regular sustainability retreats for students, faculty and administrators in 2005 and is now working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to restore habitat in a 300-acre research forest west of Salem.

The school looks at everything from how much locally harvested, organic food it serves to how many tons of greenhouse gases it emits.

Having a small environmental footprint is a big bragging right in these parts.

The Princeton Review and U.S. Green Building Council ranked Willamette, the University of Oregon and four other Oregon universities among the top 286 "green" colleges for 2011, based on the schools' practices, policies and curricula. The mere existence of such a list is evidence that universities, students and prospective employers are paying increasing attention to sustainability issues, said David Soto, the Princeton Review's director of college ratings.

The publisher surveyed 12,000 college applicants and parents earlier this year, and 64 percent of respondents said they would value having information about a school's environmental commitment. Almost a fifth of those respondents said such information would "very much" influence which school they choose.

"A lot of schools are starting to give guidance on green jobs -- what a green job is and how to secure one," Soto added.

'One coffee cup at a time'

Jobs are on just about everyone's mind in Salem, where the unemployment rate hovers stubbornly above 10 percent. People here are quick to note that a city that works, must be a city that works.

Coffee House Café owner DeLapp suggested that the municipal government could generate downtown jobs and foot traffic by offering building owners incentives to fill vacant street-level retail spaces. At the same time, existing businesses should buy locally when possible.

"One coffee cup at a time, hopefully we can change things," quipped DeLapp, who sells organic coffee roasted in a nearby town.

Christopher Marley, owner of a downtown art gallery called Pheromone, said Salem needs a more effective business-led effort to persuade new companies to move to the city. Salem could improve its prospects of attracting and retaining employers by improving its arts and entertainment options downtown.

"I really do think that if you build it they will come, as clichéd as that sounds," added Marley, who opened his gallery three months ago. "Businesses have to be wooed."

Government is far and away Salem's largest employment sector, so the municipal government is trying to lure clean-technology companies to its new Salem Renewable Energy and Technology Center near the municipal airport and I-5. Among the 80-acre business park's first tenants is Sanyo Electric Co., which opened a factory last fall that produces solar ingots and wafers for photovoltaic cells.

"We're working hard at attracting companies that are good for the environment and related to sustainability," City Manager Norris promised.

In the coming year, Oregon students will explore how Salem could foster such business clusters.

"Sustainability is something we have to pay attention to," said architecture professor Larco. "We're starting to see 'green' translate not only into environmental and human health but into business and dollars."

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PRINT

SERVICE LEARNING

10-Week Think Tanks

Students at the U. of Oregon, acting as consultants, test ways to help nearby cities. The idea is spreading.

By Scott Carlson | May 20, 2013

Rich Margerum (right), head of the department of planning, public policy, and management at the U. of Oregon, talks with a recent graduate student, Mary Adams, on a former railroad bridge remade into a pedestrian path leading to downtown Salem, Ore. RON COOPER

Eugene, Ore.

Marc Schlossberg recalls that it all started during a good old faculty gripe session. He and his colleagues—Nico Larco, Robert F. Young, and a couple of other professors—were sitting around at the University of Oregon, airing a familiar set of complaints: How do we get students to pay attention and really care about their work? Why can't that work be more relevant to the world off campus?

At the end of each term, they were grading papers embedded with intriguing, sometimes brilliant ideas. And where did those papers, those ideas, and all the money and energy used in producing them usually end up? Tossed in the wastebasket, soon to be forgotten.

"We started thinking, How many of these papers are happening on this campus, and then how many are happening across the country?" Mr. Schlossberg recalls. "It just seemed like a waste—a societal waste." Even worse, he says after a pause: "It seemed immoral."

Mr. Schlossberg and Mr. Young are urban-planning professors, and Mr. Larco is an associate professor of architecture. They all knew well the pressures that cities face, with budget cuts, outdated infrastructure, ailing urban centers, and a dearth of fresh ideas and resources. "If people working in cities had access to these ideas," says Mr. Schlossberg, an associate professor of planning, public policy, and management, "they would be crazy happy."

That griping and pondering led to the Sustainable Cities Initiative, now embarking on its fifth year as one of higher education's most successful and comprehensive service-learning programs. It has paired the needs of Oregon cities—Gresham, Salem, Springfield, and, this fall, Medford—with classes and research relevant to sustainability. In the process, it has provided a meaningful and marketable outlet for the energy and talents of hundreds of students in tens of thousands of hours of work per year. And it shows signs of going national.

It also rakes in money: The cities pay the university $200,000 to $300,000 to be part of the program, and city officials say the work has paid back enormously. In Salem—where students tackled 16 projects, in work worth at least $12-million if done by consultants—

the ideas for just one project at a solid-waste plant will save the city about $1-million every year. A project examining the economics of Salem's streetlights will save $60,000 per year.

"It might not seem exciting to help a city save $60,000," says Mark Becktel, Salem's manager of parks and transportation services, "but when you are in a financial death spiral, $60,000 a year is meaningful."

Many municipalities are desperate for such savings, but one could argue that higher education also needs the challenges the cities offer. These days, legislators are not shy about asking what colleges deliver for the state funds they get. And students clamor for education that offers meaningful, real-world skills and job connections—the very things that Oregon students say they have been getting through SCI.

Service learning is a growing trend, but most of the activity still consists of one-off projects and activities that don't connect back to the classroom, says Maureen F. Curley, president of Campus Compact, an organization that promotes service learning. Given the demand, why aren't colleges everywhere putting more students on the ground in cities and acting as think tanks for those communities?

To put it bluntly, academe doesn't always reward people for work in the real world.

"A lot of how we have judged what we do in higher education," Ms. Curley says, "is measured by time in the seat and credit hours, not necessarily by the impact you have."

In the early days of the Sustainable Cities Initiative, Mr. Larco, Mr. Schlossberg, and Mr. Young went around the Oregon campus and talked with faculty members about getting students to do applied work. Sustainability has an inherently interdisciplinary emphasis, and faculty members from planning, architecture, law, journalism, public policy, economics, and business showed interest.

Being professors themselves, the trio kept in mind that their colleagues would not participate if working with a city meant adding extra hassles or having to bend their

pedagogy to imposed lesson plans. The city work would have to blend as smoothly as possible with what professors were already doing or wanted to do.

So SCI was set up to act as a broker between cities and the university, to help make a match between municipal needs and the professors' plans.

Mr. Larco, Mr. Schlossberg, and Mr. Young also mined connections in nearby cities—first in 2009 in Gresham, a Portland suburb of about 105,000, where they reached out to alumni among city employees. More than 350 students, in 21 courses, worked on 16 projects, like designing a new city hall, studying how walkability and crime affect housing prices, and analyzing commercial-development potential.

The purpose of the year in Gresham was to find out if the model would work—and it did. One student project—examining new uses for a shuttered big-box store—took on a challenge that had flummoxed consultants for years; in the process, the project helped repair the relationship between the city and nearby Latino and Slavic communities.

"When we got things rolling, it was like we were in the Beatles. We went from zero to 60 in no time," says Mr. Young. Soon other cities started clamoring to get picked as the next partner in the Sustainable City Year program.

"All we did is take all this capacity that every university has and just cross that wire with the need for capacity that most cities have ... and boom, things took off."

With that demand, SCI could set the terms of the relationship. The founders wanted to avoid the pitfalls of the usual, random connections between classrooms and community leaders—when, say, a professor calls in a favor with a city official to show up at a class. That's considered charity and is not taken seriously. In those situations, the students' work, disconnected from other agencies or groups in the city, usually languishes and disappears, just like papers at the end of the term.

"We wanted our students to learn, but we also wanted the work to be put into practice," Mr. Schlossberg says.

Now, when cities submit applications to be the next City Year partner, they have to demonstrate commitment. First, the mayor, the city council, and the city manager all have to support the partnership. Lower-level bureaucrats will take the work seriously if the city's leaders back it, and it's likelier that the work will be coordinated across departments. The city also has to name an official who will act as a liaison with the university.

Second, the cities have to come up with a set of projects, all related to sustainability, each of which can be tackled in 10 weeks, the length of a quarter-term. "We want the city to be able to think in discrete pieces," so that students can wind up with a finished project and also offer up something useful to the city at the end of the term, Mr. Schlossberg says. Sometimes SCI staff have to help the cities determine the right size of a project.

Lastly, the cities need to offer up money—a serious indication of commitment. "We tell them that this doesn't have to be a big chunk of money from the general fund, but it can add up to a big number," Mr. Schlossberg says. When Salem gave the program $328,000 during its year, the money came from various city departments.

Springfield—a working-class neighbor of Eugene, a 10-minute bus ride from the university—came up with more than $250,000 by matching its money with funds from private landowners, the independent utility agency, the school district, and the United Way, among other sources. Jeff Towery, Springfield's assistant city manager, says city officials jumped at the chance to be a City Year partner because they saw it as a chance to develop a deeper relationship with an economic engine like the University of Oregon.

A portion of the city's payment covers the work of SCI staff members who manage communication between the cities and the faculty members, line up transportation for the students, and order catering for project presentations. A chunk of the money goes to the faculty members and students as grants to cover materials for research, field trips, and guest speakers. At the end of the term, SCI pays students to put together reports summarizing the best work from each class.

With the payments, some businesses raised objections, saying that the students were taking work away from professionals. But city officials argue that there are key differences between SCI and professional contracts. First, the students are working only on stalled projects, and the city will need professionals to finish the work.

But more important, cities are not paying for results in quite the way they would with professionals. Contractors and consultants, city officials say, will often deliver safe solutions and conclusions—whatever gets them another contract and avoids controversy.

"Innovation is often a tough thing in government," says Pete Haga, community/government-relations officer for Grand Forks, N.D., and chair of a town-gown-relations council for the National League of Cities. "We are using taxpayer dollars, and we don't like to fail."

But students are idealistic and adventurous, and they provide political cover for city officials who want to test the public's boundaries. If students come up with a few wacky ideas, city officials can easily distance themselves from the work and note that they spent relatively little on it. But the students might come up with wacky ideas that people unexpectedly love. They can provoke the public in ways that city officials might not dare.

"The thing about students is that they are not an intimidating population," says Courtney Griesel, a management analyst with Springfield, Ore., who managed the SCI program for the city. Students went out into quiet neighborhoods and gathered all sorts of information that had long eluded city officials: what people considered attractions in the city, where people liked to eat, where they shopped, how they got around.

Residents "were opening their doors, making the students tea, serving them cookies. They just opened up," Ms. Griesel says.

Students in Beth Hjelm's business-strategy course at Oregon did a marketing plan for Springfield's underutilized Dorris Ranch Living History Farm, which raises hazelnuts. (One of the students' recommendations: Stop calling the hazelnuts "filberts," because people don't know what those are.) Ms. Hjelm, who teaches capstone management courses in the college of business, says that before SCI she would mentor dozens of

students, each pursuing a separate topic. In concentrating the entire class on one project, "I can do a much deeper analysis," she says. "I can spend much more time on the substance of the work rather than arranging the work."

Springfield let the students treat a painful industrial scar on the city's landscape: an lumber mill that had been Springfield's main economic driver until it went out of business in the late 1960s. The city took over the site in the 1985. One city official called the site "our Detroit."

"It's a touchy subject, because we don't know how to start the conversation or who to start it with about how to change what this is and retain the good side of its past," says Ms. Griesel. "The safest population to hand this off to is students."

Turned loose on the site, the students came up with designs and plans that paid homage to the mill's industrial past but envisioned new uses, like a business incubator paired with an educational institution. One rendering showed people boating and swimming in a pond on the site.

"It gave us the images to have the conversations with community groups and citizen groups, so it's a little less intimidating," Ms. Griesel explains. "We can say, 'The building is still there, and the water is still there, but now it's a place where you want to go.'"

Sometimes student idealism causes bumps in the process. In one course, students were asked to design a school, with an access road, on a Springfield site. They questioned the location—open space on a wetland—and protested the inclusion of the road, which they believed would be dangerous to children, says Esther Hagenlocher, an associate professor of architecture, who taught the course. Each side dug in.

"It was a fight," she says. "It lasted weeks and weeks."

Mr. Larco talked with the class about the compromises inherent in real-world designs, and the city and the students eventually worked out their differences.

"In design schools, there is a tendency to fetishize design," he says. "To get work done, you have to understand policy, regulation, economics, and politics. Design schools tend not to touch that stuff."

Recently Ms. Griesel and her colleagues gathered in an art-studio building on the University of Oregon campus for the final presentations in a digital-arts class. The students had been assigned to come up with signage designs for Springfield, working with recommendations from a class in a previous term.

One of the students, Jonathan Xiaoran Wu, stepped up with his proposal: designing all the signs around a *Simpsons* theme, with silhouettes of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie atop poles pointing people to City Hall, the riverfront, and other attractions. (Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, has said that Springfield, Ore., was one of the inspirations for the cartoon Springfield.)

"A lot of people told me, 'Don't do that, they won't want it,'" Mr. Wu said during his presentation. "The thing is, we already have a lot of good designers in our class, so I wanted to provide a different option."

His signs were beautiful, but city officials in attendance found his proposal virtually useless. Ms. Griesel was visibly annoyed, while her colleagues seemed mildly amused.

Tatiana Havill's designs were just as colorful but more straightforward. They featured metal waves of color that bent around the poles and threatened to inundate the signs themselves. In an interview, she says she had never poured so much energy into a class project.

"I have been in digital arts for four years and have never done anything relevant to anything outside of the teachers' requirements," she says. Her work involved research on signage and conversations with engineers, who pointed out simple things, like paying attention to how the sign could be bolted to the post. Abstract learning suddenly became real.

"It was ridiculous, because most of us were like, 'Oh, yeah, the bolt!'" she says. "Because a lot of the jobs that I am going to get as a digital artist are going to be paying attention to outcomes, it was really great life experience."

Ms. Curley, of Campus Compact, believes that higher education needs to head in that direction. "The millennial generation are doers—they want to get out there and they want to get involved," she says. And employers are looking for the kinds of skills that real-world work can provide.

A lot of colleges demonstrate their support for civic engagement by having students collect canned goods for a shelter or paint a building in a tough neighborhood. That's fine, Ms. Curley says, "but the challenge is, How do we make it more than just a few hours in the community? How do we make it deeper?"

The Sustainable Cities Initiative has begun to spread. For the past two years, Mr. Larco and Mr. Schlossberg have held a conference each spring at the University of Oregon, where they lay out their methods, plans, successes, and failures. Colleges in California, Indiana, Iowa, and Minnesota are starting programs based on the SCI model, although some have been timid about charging the cities money for the work. The Oregon-based founders themselves are even looking to establish City Year programs in China through a Chinese faculty member with connections overseas.

But many of these programs face a challenge endemic in academe: Community-based learning and engaged scholarship are not always embraced when it comes to promotion and tenure. "It has always been a bit of a struggle to get faculty involved if there aren't incentives and when they already have a full plate with their writing and other things they have to do," Ms. Curley says.

Mr. Young, one of SCI's three founders, knows that well. Organizing the program took up probably 10 to 12 hours a week and cost him a journal article per quarter, he says. When his third-year review came up, his colleagues told him to publish more—his work with the initiative, however meaningful, wouldn't count.

"I think the average journal article is read by seven people, not including your mother," he adds sardonically.

He ended up leaving Oregon for the University of Texas at Austin—not in bitterness, he says, but because both he and his wife were offered plum positions there. But his experience at Oregon drove home his belief that academe generally should rethink its policies for promotion and tenure—not to loosen the requirements, but to be more competitive.

"Really, really good talent wants to have that additional dimension in what they are doing, and they want to have it supported and acknowledged," Mr. Young says.

Recently he was part of a team at Austin that interviewed a job candidate from the Ivy League, who wanted to know whether work that engaged the community and other institutions would count toward tenure. Probably not, Mr. Young had to admit.

He plans to start something like SCI at Austin—but only after he has tenure. And he wants that version of the program to have a rural component. "Eighty-five percent of the population may be in the cities in Texas, but a huge amount of the political clout is in the countryside," he says. "That is the place where there is the highest level of need."

Indeed, SCI's founders look around and see lots of need—and wasted effort. One recent morning, while walking through Oregon's architecture building, Mr. Schlossberg and I happened on the final presentations of students in various courses in the department. In one, students had been assigned to hand-draw a building planned at the University of California at Berkeley decades ago, but never designed or built. In another, students stood anxiously next to colorful computer renderings and intricate scale models of buildings in cardboard and balsa wood, while professors and professional architects critiqued their work.

Mr. Schlossberg marveled at the students' skills and the labor they had put into their projects. But everything we saw was merely hypothetical—buildings and landscapes that had no real clients and no chance of ever being built.

"I think about people outside this world"—the cloistered studio—"and how great it would be for them to be as impressed as I am," Mr. Schlossberg says. "What if the architects were designing a police station, and the police chief were here—with the added layer of urgency and importance?"

Just think, he says, of studios like this being held at colleges across the country every 12 weeks or so. "It just seems like a big untapped resource."

Read other items in this The Future of Work package.

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Scott Carlson is a senior writer who explores where higher education is headed. He is a co-author of *Hacking College: Why the Major Doesn't Matter — and What Really Does* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2025). Follow him on LinkedIn, or write him at scott.carlson@chronicle.com.

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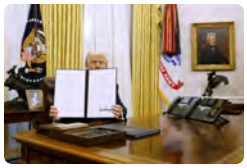

DATA & POLICY

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A SWEEPING MOVE

A Federal-Funding Pause Sent Shockwaves

Class act

Oregon towns in need of regeneration have tapped the talent and enthusiasm of local students, writes **April Dembosky**

EDUCATION
SUSTAINABLE CITIES INITIATIVE

Sustainable future: Springfield is looking to turn the Booth-Kelly mill into flexible spaces

PHOTO: JEN PECENKA

The red smokestacks that form the backdrop to downtown Springfield, Oregon, are symbols of a bygone era, a bygone economy. Some locals say the chimneys of the town's last paper mill inspired the visual signature of the fictionalised Springfield in the opening credits of *The Simpsons*, the television cartoon show – representing not just the culture of Every City, US, but the economic and environmental ills that have come to plague one-industry towns.

Springfield, Oregon, once thrived on lumber production. But jobs have been pruned after environmental battles and policy changes sharply curbed the cutting of the state's pine and Douglas fir trees.

It is a history that Courtney Griesel, the city's economic development analyst, wants to preserve and correct. As she oversees the redevelopment of the abandoned, polluted Booth-Kelly mill, she is looking for a design that is environmentally and economically sustainable. She wants a space that celebrates the city's timber heritage but also looks several economic cycles into the future.

> The city wants a space that looks several economic cycles into the future

"My fear is we will create the same problem for the next generation," she says. "I don't want to make every decision in the moment. We want to encourage people to build flexible spaces."

For help with her vision, Griesel turned to students at the University of Oregon in neighbouring Eugene. Dozens of students in city planning, architecture, public policy, economics and other departments used Springfield as a real-life testing ground for theories learned in class.

Students produced drawings and analyses for a revamped Booth-Kelly mill, and drafted designs for new roads, a school and a library. They gave presentations to the city council and answered questions from the public.

"What the students present is conceptual. It is the start of a conversation," says Bob Choquette, the director of the Sustainable Cities Initiative, the university programme that organises the student effort. "An architectural firm will give you one design. Here, you can engage 15 students and you get a variety of ideas to choose from."

For this service, Springfield paid the university $229,000 – a hefty sum for a cash-strapped city, but Griesel says the city spends the same amount on a single contract with a professional consultant. While some ideas were not politically or economically feasible, and just a few were brilliant, most contained nuggets of insight the city will piece together as it finalises its plans.

That was the original goal of Marc Schlossberg, professor of planning and public policy at the University of Oregon, who helped create the programme three years ago. He saw too many final papers at the end of the semester with great ideas that no one else would ever see.

"What a waste all these great ideas are being put on paper and kept inside these walls," he says, motioning to his office's book-lined walls. "If people in the community could have access to these ideas, it could reorientate how they see their problems."

Schlossberg and a group of other professors struck a deal to experiment with the city of ➤

EDUCATION
SUSTAINABLE CITIES INITIATIVE

'Students are incredibly desperate to make change happen now'

Gresham, outside Portland, and incorporate applied projects into their curriculum. The student work was so well received that, the following year, several cities competed for the opportunity to work with students. Salem, the state capital, won and agreed to pay $350,000. Springfield signed up the following year.

Now, dozens of universities are calling Schlossberg wanting to replicate the programme. As debates continue about the cost of higher education, universities must defend their relevance.

'We can't be happy in our ivory tower. The community is asking what we are contributing'

"We see this as a way of updating higher education for the modern era," says Schlossberg. "We can't be happy in our ivory tower any more. The community is asking what we are contributing. Students are incredibly desperate to make change happen now. They want to learn by doing."

The programme has created some tension with professional groups, which fear their city contracts are being usurped by students. The Salem chapter of the American Institute of Architects objected to the student collaboration at first. City officials tried to appease the consultants by playing down the contributions as "just student work". At the same time, they called it "on a par with professionals" to justify spending tax dollars to the city council and the community. At the end of the year, the professional architects won a contract to design a new police station using drafts from the students.

Slices of history: the Booth-Kelly mill in its heyday and a proposed new look

That project would not have happened without the students, says Linda Norris, Salem's city manager. "The city had been cutting staff since 2008," she says. "I was concerned about how we were going to achieve a number of goals we had set with the limited resources we had."

The students propelled them forward more than three years, she says, helping design new energy-efficient street lights, bicycle lanes, park signage and new uses for the wastewater treatment plant that saved the city $400,000.

The students recognised that the plant had capacity for processing much more waste than was then passing through. Since the local fruit canneries had lost business to food producers in South America, they produced much less waste water. The students suggested the city solicit waste from businesses in nearby regions and charge to process it.

"The students got us away from thinking we were just here to do one thing," says Greg Eyerly, the city's wastewater treatment manager. His team is now working on technology to transform sewage into fuel for the city's police vehicle fleet. "We want to take it from the toilet tank to the gas tank."

The university has yet to decide which city it will focus on in the next academic year. It will soon run out of cities in the state that can afford the annual fee, so it is considering focusing on implementing some of the proposals it proposed in the first three cities, such as the Booth-Kelly mill site in Springfield.

But if one local business owner had his way, the students would help him develop an economic plan to exploit the city's rumoured Simpsons connection – a title vied for by Springfields in 11 other states.

Jack Koehler, the owner of Sweety's candy and frozen yoghurt shop, wants to turn his street into a six-block "Simpsonsville", a tourist strip that takes a decorative cue from the yellow paint of his store and the life-sized plastic figures of the Simpson family he has set up outside.

"I want to cartoon this area up," he says. "Let's capitalise." ■

PHOTO: COURTNEY SKOOG

Forbes

Why Universities Need Celebrating from The (City) Rooftops

Haydn Shaugnessy
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Commentators who seek a big fix for society tend to say education, like all those other old institutions, is broken. But education is also fixing itself and sometimes it's doing a fantastic job. Last week I got talking to Nico Larco and Marc Schlossberg of the University of Oregon. Marc and Nico founded the Sustainable Cities Initiative there.

Wait! Wait, you say, another University with a sustainable cities project. And I said the same. What's new? But Nico and Marc have created the Sustainable City Year, SCY, and it is truly different.

SCY focuses the resources and ingenuity of professors and students across 10 – 12 departments on one city for one year, with the aim of addressing and catalyzing change across all issues that impinge on sustainability.

There are two results we need to share and think about. First though the program, in brief.

The program, run last year in Salem, Oregon, takes city change on at an unprecedented scale. In Salem 500 students from 28 courses participated in the year long project along with 20 professors from ten disciplines. All in, they donated a total of 80,000 hours to the city.

"There's nothing like it in the world," Marc told me. "And it's a simple model. We began by asking what if we could ask professors with

existing courses to point those at a single city over a single year and address issues that are within the existing curriculum. And do this with a sustainability focus. It turns out that cities are desperate to move into a new sustainability and livability model. But they are schooled in an old model and they are busy. We on the other hand have students who are like an ideas' machine and are being trained in these areas – sustainability and livability."

Cities might want to try the sustainability route but as Marc implies, it is difficult.

"Cities face obstacles," says Nico. "Like, who are the stakeholders? Do they trust the city? Is there capacity for the city to move forward? Is the full realm of possibility understood?"

So the SCY folks help with these issues and develop very concrete plans for the lucky city that get's a bite at it – by the way cities from as far as China and New Zealand want to adopt the model. That means creating new space use plans, or figuring out how to introduce new environmental technologies, or how to adapt the transport system, or even how to design a better building. If it has sustainability, planning, architecture, landscaping, business, journalism, product design, civil engineering, law, economics or other relevant skill needs, SCY will help.

So to the first impact. Clearly this is replicable, across problem-sets beyond sustainability. You could take any challenge that cities face and build out a similar swarm of resources. Also, and this is vitally important, it tells us we do have the resources to effect major change quickly, and they are not even locked away. So no more complaining about the big reset. Let's just get on with it.

The second impact of the program though is on the students and the educational environment. Young people,I've said elsewhere, are extraordinarily capable. They see a set of problems in front of them, caused by financial chaos, poor resource allocation and poor decision making. Heck, they are the ones studying this stuff.

Two things prevent them impacting on society. One is we try to stop them and we do it through the weight of inertia that older cynical generations apply to the challenges of change. The second is we stall

their enthusiasm for the years they are studying, the period when they are high energy and fearless.

The University of Oregon seems to me to be liberating talent but more importantly empowering capability. The talent is astonishingly prescient about what needs to change and how it can be done. The capability actually lies within all of us – many, many of us who look out on the world right now and bemoan poor political decisions. We all need empowering at the level we can contribute.

We should be celebrating our Universities for doing that for young people, and handing younger people the keys a whole lot earlier. SCY is a model for how to do just that.

THE BLOG

Sustainable Cities Work for Climate Change

To survive on this planet at the numbers we have amassed, cities must more efficiently support their human habitants, especially with persistent constraints on water, land, and food.

By Jonathan Patz, Contributor
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To survive on this planet at the numbers we have amassed, cities must more efficiently support their human habitants, especially with persistent constraints on water, land, and food. Organizing people into cities can be an important strategy for conserving land for farming, biodiversity, and more wilderness; but compact cities and strong towns also improve municipal-service delivery and encourage efficient use of infrastructure investments. Additionally, urban dwellers' lowered individual demands for space and energy make new technological innovations, such as renewables, more viable as meaningful alternatives to current systems.

On a global scale, the movement into cities can ironically offer substantial environmental advances. Sustainable cities work for climate change, and in the best cases, they are what's working for other efforts related to health, environmental conservation, and even municipal bottom lines. For example, in the U.S., the average per capita energy use associated with living in a compact-urban setting vs. a traditional suburb is about half for buildings and a third for transportation. The compact setting also encourages physical activity through active transportation and can save the city money on road expansion and maintenance.

In the U.S., there is increasing demand for quality urban places to live; however, to date, such places are undersupplied and increasingly accessible only to those of exceptional means. The growing desire for clean, healthy, and aesthetic places to live means smart urban policies can simultaneously improve people's lives and the environment.

Many city officials realize the demand for healthy places, and the ultimate goal of creating truly livable and flourishing habitats for humans. Yet the prevailing patterns of highway and automobile-centered mobility investments contribute to the growing trend both in sedentary lifestyles and associated growing waistlines across America and other industrializing nations.

In the developing world, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia, urbanization rates are the world's highest, and thus represent some of our greatest public-health opportunities from "Livable Cities" initiatives. For example, in transportation planning, designing for people rather than for cars has emerged as a golden opportunity to advance public health. In settings like Ethiopia, University of Wisconsin projects include urban planning that is both fitness promoting (via biking or walking) and changing norms so that equitable alternative transportation become the new index for modernization, rather than outdated (and misguided) measures such as number of cars per family. Where highways and roads have yet to be built, there is the greatest chance to pre-empt inefficient and unhealthy investments and to make livable, healthy urban design the norm for emerging economies.

Back in the USA, universities can provide struggling towns and cities with an injection of energy and experimentation. Engaging with cities through coursework is a model for service learning that has immediate and obvious benefits for both the University and the partner city. At the same time, "univer-city" partnerships push students with experiences that prepare them for life outside campus. Programs modeled after the Sustainable City Year from the University of Oregon are being adopted around the country, and are putting the "public" back in public institutions by pairing city projects with existing coursework.

To generate new knowledge, educate tomorrow's leaders, and serve larger communities it would behoove nearly every subject being studied at universities today to reframe questions by considering the role that cities play in answering them. The potential solutions emerging from campuses should be tested in real-world settings. Cities provide such a setting with the complexity that universities require for multidisciplinary problem-based research. Strengthened relationships between cities and universities can be fundamental to rolling out new technologies -- and evaluating existing ones -- that can help establish Livable Cities across the globe. The renewed coordination of university rigor, student enthusiasm, and city pragmatism provides great examples of what's working for local and global problems, and it's the kind of thing we're working to encourage.

This post is part of a Huffington Post What's Working series on the environment. The series is putting a spotlight on initiatives and solutions that are actually making a difference -- whether in the battle against climate change, or tackling pollution or other environmental challenges. To see all the posts in the series, read here.