INTRODUCTION

THE SUSTAINABLE NEIGHBORHOODS INITIATIVE of Portland State University’s Institute for Sustainable Solutions connects PSU students and faculty with groups of community organizations in long-term partnerships that advance sustainability at the neighborhood scale. These partnerships engage students and faculty in real-world problem solving while also increasing the capacity of local organizations to foster healthy communities. Serving as a liaison between faculty and community partners, the Institute for Sustainable Solutions (ISS) assists with project development and management for each engagement, assesses project outcomes, and measures and communicates success. Since its inception in 2014, nearly 1,500 students have participated in Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative (SNI) projects, making it PSU’s largest community-engagement program focused on sustainability.

During the 2015-16 academic year, ISS staff established several key priorities to increase the effectiveness and impact of SNI. Priorities included focusing on projects and research opportunities that could lead to greater community impact and expanding opportunities to place more PSU students in paid internships to advance neighborhood sustainability projects. ISS exceeded this goal by offering 19 opportunities for students to receive financial support to work with organizations on sustainability activities tied to SNI projects. ISS was also successful in developing focused projects that were more closely aligned with community partner needs, resulting in a larger number of multi-term projects that yielded stronger outcomes for community partners. While this strategy decreased the overall number of students involved in SNI projects as compared to the year before, it significantly deepened partnerships with community organizations and resulted in more engaging projects for students and greater impact in the community.
Community Partners

Strong partnerships with community organizations are the cornerstone of the Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative. The SNI has partnerships with groups of community organizations in four Portland neighborhoods, each with specific interests and priorities.

» Foster Green: Comprising approximately seven neighborhoods in outer-southeast Portland, Foster Green’s mission is to facilitate community investments that build on existing assets to address sustainability goals through projects related to food systems, environmental justice, education, and community development.

» SoMa (South of Market): Located in downtown Portland, SoMa is a diverse urban neighborhood and regional destination, serving residents, students, employees, and businesses. Neighborhood groups collaborate to identify and implement sustainability projects related to placemaking, energy efficiency, and materials management.

» Living Cully: Located in a residential neighborhood in outer-northeast Portland, Living Cully is supported by a diverse, cross-sector group of organizations committed to using sustainability as an anti-poverty strategy. Projects include responding to community needs regarding health, employment, education, and housing.

» Lloyd EcoDistrict: Aiming to be one of the most sustainable business districts in North America, Lloyd EcoDistrict in inner-northeast Portland is interested in projects related to green business, energy efficiency, materials management, and community engagement.

Accomplishments

In 2015-16, more than 700 students from 45 classes across nine different PSU departments worked with community partners on 86 neighborhood-scale projects through the initiative. Several exemplary community-university partnerships include:

» creating business plans to support Latina clothing designers,

» designing branding and wayfinding signage for an urban bike and pedestrian trail in outer southeast Portland,

» grant writing for a local environmental nonprofit, and

» constructing a survey to determine how commercial businesses and residential properties in downtown Portland can reduce their energy use.

SNI also forged a new partnership with the PSU Learning Gardens Laboratory, a 12-acre garden site in southeast Portland that provides educational and leadership development opportunities for students of all ages. The garden is a model for sustainable urban food systems that provides an enriching environment for community-based learning.

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| Selected Sustainability Outcomes | SNI partner Zenger Farm will use community outreach findings conducted by PSU students to strengthen their emphasis on diversity in their next strategic plan. 
SNI partner Living Cully used research that PSU students and interns conducted on strategies to prevent displacement to successfully advocate for the city of Portland to adopt new policies to protect low-income people and preserve affordable housing as part of the city’s 30-year comprehensive plan. |
Program Evaluation

To evaluate programmatic efforts, SNI administers a survey to students, faculty, and community partners at the end of each course to identify successes and areas for improvement, and understand how applied projects enhance student learning.

Of the 172 students who completed the survey, 71 percent of students agreed with the statement that the community partner project provided a “real world” experience that enhanced what they learned in their course. Students also gained knowledge of place-based sustainability challenges, with 81 percent of students agreeing that the SNI project enhanced their understanding of local community issues.

“I am glad that I took this course. In my major I will never get to have an experience like this. I have learned many valuable skills that will help me in the future.”

– PSU Student

Faculty agree with students that SNI projects increase course learning. All of the 11 faculty respondents agreed that community projects provided a “real world” experience that enhanced what was learned in class and deepened the students’ understanding of the course content.

Faculty and community partners also believe that ISS plays a crucial role in brokering effective partnerships. 91 percent of faculty respondents agreed with the statement that partnering through ISS provides more added benefits than partnering on their own with community organizations.

“Without ISS support I simply would not have had the bandwidth to complete this project, resulting in lost opportunities for student learning.”

– Community Partner

“ISS provided support for my students and was an excellent liaison between the students and the community partner. This allowed students to connect more easily with the community organization without adding to my workload.”

– PSU Faculty
Signature Projects

ISS develops signature projects with community partners to address complex sustainability issues, leveraging the efforts of multiple PSU courses, research projects, or internships over time. Signature projects deliver substantial value to community partners by helping them tackle difficult sustainability issues facing local communities. Two exemplary projects are highlighted below.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT AND LAND BUYS IN CULLY

As Portland continues to grow, there is an increasing threat of losing affordable housing to rising rent and property prices throughout the city, including in socioeconomically and racially diverse neighborhoods like Cully. To support community-led efforts to prevent displacement of low-income individuals and communities of color, two sequential Urban Studies and Planning classes analyzed land parcels for potential purchase by Living Cully for affordable housing.

In the Concepts of Community Development course, students analyzed growth trends to project the amount of subsidized and market-rate affordable housing that might be lost to development in the next 30 years and determined how many new units of affordable housing should be built to support current and future residents. Students also developed criteria to identify ideal areas of the neighborhood for future development based on key findings from a review of community development literature.

The findings were then passed to a new cohort of students in a Downtown Revitalization class, who used this work to examine current market conditions and identify specific properties that were best suited for residential infill development. Parcels were then ranked based on priority factors identified by the partner, including access to public transportation, grocery stores, schools, and parks. Findings from this applied research will influence the property acquisition strategy of Living Cully, helping to prevent the displacement of low-income people and communities of color from a rapidly changing neighborhood.

DESIGNING SAFE BIKE AND PEDESTRIAN ROUTES IN LENTS

Creating safe routes for bicyclists and pedestrians to travel throughout a neighborhood is a challenge faced by many east Portland communities, including the Lents neighborhood. In response to these challenges, community groups and citizens have proposed the Lents Green Ring, a network of active transportation routes throughout the neighborhood. The Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative partnered up multiple classes with community organizations Livable Lents, ROSE Community Development, and OPAL Environmental Justice to collaborate on various aspects of the proposed Lents Green Ring.
To help spread the word about this proposed amenity, students in five different sections of Community Design Studio graphic design courses developed branding strategies to increase awareness about the Green Ring using brand books, visual identities, and brand positioning statements. Final projects were presented to the community partners, and one student’s work was selected as the Green Ring visual brand. The community partner’s plan to feature the brand on signage to create a sense of place and community connection.

While graphic design students worked on branding, a team of students in a Civil & Environmental Engineering Capstone class also worked in collaboration with Livable Lents, ROSE Community Development, and OPAL Environmental Justice to design an improved pathway for bikes and pedestrians along the Green Ring. Students developed plans for redirecting the current route from the Springwater Corridor onto 87th Avenue.

The proposed route design and branding strategy aim to allow bikers and pedestrians to travel into Lents more easily and safely to explore the community. The work of these course projects have helped catch the attention of the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability and the Bureau of Transportation, which are increasingly interested in seeing this community-led project advance.

Lessons Learned

The 2015-16 academic year was remarkably successful, although some challenges provide the opportunity for SNI to continue to improve in the upcoming year.

FULLY UNDERSTAND PARTNER ORGANIZATION’S SPECIFIC NEEDS

One goal for 2015-16 was to focus on specific priority areas for each of our SNI partners, targeting activities to better address the needs of each organization. Examples included focusing on affordable housing in Cully, community outreach and engagement in SoMa, bicycle and pedestrian safety in Foster Green, and climate resilience in Lloyd. While students and faculty engaged in projects that better aligned with partner’s interests, these focal areas also resulted in fewer academic courses being involved in community partnerships through SNI than the year prior. However, a more focused approach allowed ISS to develop a greater number of “signature projects” that spanned multiple terms, courses, or academic departments, and that yielded stronger impacts for both students and the community.

UNDERSTAND AND ADAPT TO PARTNER’S INTEREST AND CAPACITY

While students learn from and provide support to community partners, ISS staff and PSU faculty must also be aware of the balance between expanding partner’s capacity and overwhelming them. When setting up projects, it is important to maintain an adequate scope of work and not be too ambitious. When implementing course projects, it is also important to strengthen communication with partners via regular check-ins, and to be prepared to adapt to the organization’s
fluctuating capacity, as they might reallocate staff time to respond to funding opportunities or other demands during the course of a project. Finally, two years into these partnerships, it is important to recognize that organizational interest in collaborating evolves over time, and that it is important to periodically review and recommit to partnerships.

**SUPPORTING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Another goal for 2015-16 was to increase the number of student interns and improve the corresponding professional development activities for those students. While there was a significant increase in the number of internship positions offered, scheduling student professional development activities was put on hold as ISS developed a more coherent strategy to support the overall student experience. ISS has since decided to connect these student internships with a new Student Fellows program, launched in fall 2016, which will provide professional development opportunities for students from across campus who are interested in sustainability issues.

**CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS WITH FACULTY**

Faculty play a critical role in facilitating community-based projects that enhance student learning and deliver positive impacts to the community. However, faculty face multiple pressures surrounding teaching, research, service, and earning tenure. Occasionally, faculty can become overwhelmed by the combination of these factors with community partnership work. To improve the faculty experience, ISS can better clarify faculty expectations during outreach and professional development activities, as well as prior to solidifying the scope of work for any SNI projects. By improving shared expectations, all parties can embark on a partnership with clearer expectations to successfully bring the project to fruition.

**CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING**

Community-based learning is a core component of SNI and it is essential for students to conceptualize how and why this type of pedagogy provides numerous benefits to the student experience. Since many undergraduate students are experiencing community-based learning for the first time, enhanced training about the experience will assist students in navigating the unfamiliar territory. As such, there is an opportunity to refine how ISS staff, faculty, and community partners discuss the relevance and expectations around projects to students during the start of the term.
2016-17 Goals

With these lessons in mind, ISS aims to deepen relationships with key Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative partners during the 2016-17 academic year to improve opportunities for collaboration, increase visibility, and lay a foundation for future fundraising to help sustain the program. The following are specific priorities for SNI during the upcoming year:

**IMPROVE THE WORK**

When launched in 2014, SNI embarked on three-year partnerships with select community-based organizations working on neighborhood sustainability issues in the Portland-metro area. As we begin the third year of these partnerships, ISS intends to deepen relationships with its SNI partners who have demonstrated significant interest in working with PSU, explore opportunities to thematically focus our work, clarify mutual roles and expectations, and increase the impact of our collaborative efforts. While ISS will expand some partnerships, we will also review all partnerships to ensure they meet SNI’s goals of enriching the student experience while adding capacity to help community organizations advance sustainability efforts at the neighborhood-scale.

**INCREASE VISIBILITY**

Signature projects consistently produce the strongest outcomes of SNI. By working with community partners to build on efforts from different courses, research projects, or internships around a single project and over a sustained period of time, SNI is able to develop projects with tangible cumulative impact that help tackle complex sustainability issues in the local community. ISS will seek to increase visibility of these projects that sometimes—quite literally—change the world.

**EXPLORE FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORT**

As the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation’s generous gift to PSU sunsets in the 2018-19 fiscal year, ISS will need to identify other resources to support its community partnership programs. These resources will come through a variety of channels including philanthropy, government grants, and contracts. SNI has developed a strong track record of programmatic success and received a $26,500 grant from the PSU Bookstore Foundation in 2015. Currently SNI is well-positioned to receive additional funding. ISS staff have already begun to develop and implement plans for the program to remain innovative and financially sustainable long into the future.

Contact Us

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