Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative

The Institute for Sustainable Solutions’ (ISS) Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative (SNI) connects Portland State University (PSU) students and faculty with community organizations in long-term partnerships to advance sustainability at the neighborhood scale. The SNI is designed to support community-university relationships actively connecting community partners with the University to provide high-quality student engagement and applied research, while providing PSU faculty with assistance to develop and implement projects that deepen learning and engagement by immersing students in real-world sustainability issues.

The goals of this program are to create measureable impact on our SNI partners’ sustainability goals and to enhance the student experience by providing increased opportunities for faculty, staff, and students at PSU to work closely with select community organizations. One of the most important and effective elements of the SNI are the course collaborations that ISS facilitates so that faculty and students can conduct field work and research with community partners. Additionally, ISS also provides students with paid internship opportunities to work with our SNI partners, and collaborates with SNI partners on grant applications, program assessment, communications and storytelling.

ISS has been facilitating community-university partnerships around sustainability for many years. In 2013-14 ISS created the Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative to formalize some of this work. In the 2014-15 academic year the SNI had partnerships with the following groups of organizations working collaboratively to advance sustainability: SoMa EcoDistrict (south of Market Street in downtown Portland), Foster Green (outer southeast Portland), Living Cully (northeast Portland), and Lloyd EcoDistrict (inner northeast Portland).
**ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

**Course Collaborations**
In the last academic year, faculty in 18 PSU departments collaborated with community partners through over 40 courses. 780 students directly participated in projects with our SNI community partners, and of the students who responded to our assessment surveys, 80 percent of students felt that the community partner project deepened their understanding of their course content, and 90 percent agreed that working with community partners enhanced their understanding of local community issues.

“The [SNI] community partner project enhanced the material we learned in the course by applying the concepts to real life experiences.” - PSU Student

PSU faculty also see the value of collaborating with ISS and our SNI partners. One hundred percent of the faculty who responded to assessment surveys agreed that students learned skills through the project that they might not have learned in the classroom, and 91 percent of faculty agreed that partnering through the Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative provides more benefits compared to traditional partnerships at PSU. Traditionally faculty are solely responsible for identifying partners and managing projects, and the community partnerships often end once the term is over.

“ISS was instrumental in connecting the students to the community partners. Without the SNI we would have had several challenges, some as simple as coordinating a meeting time and location, and others as challenging as integrating coursework into ongoing projects. The SNI model is something that can have broad appeal to faculty, students, and community members alike.” - PSU Faculty

Community partners are also pleased with the results of our first complete year of collaborative SNI projects. 86 percent of community partner respondents agreed that the students’ work filled an unmet need for their organization, and 93 percent agreed that the organization would not have been able to do this work without the contribution of PSU students and that their organization will use the students’ work in their ongoing activities or strategies.

“Thank you for bringing this [SNI project] opportunity to our neighborhood! In a part of Portland that often feels a bit isolated, connecting with PSU has really launched some positive changes.” - Community Partner
**Signature Projects**

Over time, the combination of several SNI course partnerships, student fellowships, and modest investments of ISS staff time has culminated in several “signature projects” where the overall impact of the SNI partnerships has become increasingly clear.

**SoMa Parklet:**
The SoMa parklet, located in front of the food carts on SW 4th Ave, is downtown Portland’s first ever public parklet. This project meets SoMa’s goal for creating quality public spaces and building community by providing people with a place to gather. The project was initiated in Fall 2013 when ISS connected the SoMa EcoDistrict with a design studio course in PSU’s School of Architecture. PSU students worked with SoMa to design plans for the parklet, then ISS and partners led a crowd-funding campaign that raised more than $15,000. Finally, in May 2015, 20 architecture students completed construction of the parklet, providing a valuable experience taking an idea from paper into reality. The project’s ultimate success was based on cooperation between ISS, SoMa EcoDistrict, the School of Architecture, and help from businesses like Oregon Pacific Investment & Development, CH2M/Hill, Sustainable Northwest Wood, and Green Hammer.

**Malden Court Community Orchard:**
Students from Public Administration’s undergraduate Intro to Civic Engagement course partnered with local organization Green Lents to create a shared vision for a new community orchard in the outer southeast neighborhood of Lents. For three consecutive quarters almost 70 students canvassed homes in the neighborhood to educate and inform community members about the project and invite residents to participate in planning efforts at community design meetings. The students dedicated 350 hours of service to this project and successfully canvassed 1,300 homes, surveying 260 local residents to get their perspective on the orchard. This work added much needed capacity to local grassroots organizations who did not have the ability to conduct community outreach on their own. The project also provided a practical learning experience for the students by providing them with an opportunity to apply the concepts of civic engagement that they were learning in their class, and to begin to understand firsthand some of the complex challenges faced by community leaders.
The Cully Critter Cruise:
In May 2015, the Critter Cruise was the first-ever community-led nature and wildlife inventory in northeast Portland's Cully neighborhood. Originally imagined in Fall 2013 by students in an Urban Environmental Issues class and Living Cully as a neighborhood biodiversity survey, students continued to work on the project through the PSU Student Community Engagement Center. The Cully Critter Cruise evolved into an interactive naturalist tour of four neighborhood gardens. Residents of all ages walked the neighborhood to identify and record the plants and animals along their route, and volunteers from a variety of environmental organizations, including PSU students in the Biology Department's Entomology Club and almost 30 students from a sustainability-focused Freshman Inquiry course, supported the event. The findings from the walks were documented in a large map illustrating the biodiversity of the area, which will now be used in education programs at local schools. Overall, Cully Critter Cruise promoted ecological awareness, science literacy, and community engagement for the 100 walk participants plus many more who attended the grand opening of a new neighborhood park the same day.

Fulbright Scholars Visit
In March 2015, the Institute for International Education, which partners with the U.S. Department of State to administer the Fulbright Program, asked ISS to host an Enrichment Seminar. This event brought together 150 Fulbright Scholars from around the world to highlight how Portland State supports civic engagement and action around local sustainability issues. ISS helped plan the three-day event, giving talks and facilitating seminars, and introducing the international Fulbright Scholars to Portland’s neighborhood sustainability initiatives by leading tours with SNI partners. On these tours, the Fulbright Scholars met local sustainability leaders and learned about various neighborhood-scale community sustainability projects.
PARTNERSHIPS

SoMa EcoDistrict
The SoMa (South of Market) EcoDistrict is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating a more sustainable and connected neighborhood in downtown Portland. SoMa’s goals include advancing waste and energy programs that bring the district closer to City goals, improving the quality of life of public spaces, and inspiring a greater sense of community in the district.

2014-2015 SNI Accomplishments:
• Support for one PSU student as a part-time dedicated SoMa graduate assistant
• 10 course collaborations, involving over 100 PSU students
• Organized SoMa ReUse Fair & Community Share event, diverting 1,382 pounds of material waste
• Signature Project: The 4th Avenue Parklet

Foster Green
Foster Green is an alliance of neighborhood associations, place-based organizations, businesses and community members dedicated to preserving and restoring environmental assets, growing local living-wage jobs and businesses, and building cross-cultural social cohesion in southeast Portland.

2014-2015 SNI Accomplishments:
• Support for one PSU student as a part-time dedicated Foster Green graduate assistant
• 24 course collaborations, involving 430 PSU students
• Support for six PSU student sustainability fellows (1,200 hours dedicated to community projects)
• Signature Project: Malden Court Community Orchard

Living Cully
Living Cully is an innovative collaboration between four nonprofit organizations in the Cully Neighborhood in northeast Portland. Living Cully believes that sustainability should be reinterpreted as an anti-poverty strategy, as a means to address multiple disparities in health, income, education, community engagement, and natural resources by concentrating environmental investments at the neighborhood scale and braiding those investments with traditional community development resources.

2014-2015 SNI Accomplishments:
• Support for one PSU student as a paid part-time anti-displacement community outreach intern
• 13 course collaborations, involving 100 PSU students
• Support for four PSU student sustainability fellows (800 hours dedicated to community projects)
• ISS Sustainability Curriculum Coordinator joined the Living Cully Partners meeting
• Signature Project: The Cully Critter Cruise

Lloyd EcoDistrict
The Lloyd EcoDistrict, located in inner northeast Portland, is a place where businesses, residents, government agencies, and nonprofits all share a vision: to build the most sustainable living-and-working district in North America. The district’s four main areas of focus are transportation, water, energy, and waste.

2014-2015 SNI Accomplishments:
• Support for two PSU students to work as paid part-time marketing and outreach interns
• Two course collaborations, involving 60 PSU students
• ISS Assistant Director joined the Lloyd EcoDistrict Board
LESSONS LEARNED

Overall, the first full year of the Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative has been successful. Program assessment shows that students, faculty, and community partners all agree that partnerships through the SNI have enhanced the student learning experience at PSU, and have meaningfully impacted partner organizations and their communities.

“I really appreciate classes like this that allow students to do real work in the field for outside organizations. It bridges the gap between student life and career life. I feel better prepared to enter the workforce with experiences like these.” - SNI Student

“Thanks to ISS for your commitment to advancing learning around sustainability issues and for facilitating effective community partnerships.” - Community Partner

Support Long-term Engagement
The Fellows Program has been an opportunity to capitalize on successful community partner collaborations by supporting continued engagement. Community partners expressed interest in deeper engagement from students in course collaboration projects, and the students were excited to continue their work for longer than just 10 weeks. The student sustainability fellows have added more capacity to both faculty and partners, and the program has created a rich learning experience for students.

Find Significant Wins
Signature projects have been some of the most impactful outcomes of the SNI. These projects are the culmination of faculty and student work over multiple terms in different courses and disciplines, student sustainability fellows, and dedicated ISS staff time, and have proven to be a successful way to leverage all the resources the University has to offer. Through program assessment and listening to feedback from partners and faculty, ISS staff have learned the importance of quality over quantity - proving that thoughtful and well-aligned long-term collaborations may be more valuable to partners than multiple one time collaborations.

Concentrate Resources
Throughout the last year, the SNI partnerships have grown and matured. Focusing multiple resources on a limited number of neighborhoods creates significant benefits. Through the SNI, ISS created a strong hub for building and managing strategic partnerships. As ISS staff work together with community partners we learn to deliver more value to the community, and partner organizations better understand how to work with students and faculty. Our SNI partners increasingly see themselves as participants in our educational mission and actively consider ways to further enhance the student experience. Faculty participating in these collaborations learn how to structure their courses to provide students with highly relevant learning experiences. The focus more efficiently leverages the resources of the University in support of their neighborhood goals.

Manage Expectations
There is a continued need to establish clear expectations between community partners, ISS staff and PSU faculty from the start about what partners need, what faculty can provide, what is expected from all parties, and how the project clearly connects to student learning. As the broker of the SNI partnerships, ISS needs to remain focused on creating and maintaining channels for clear communication.

Focus on Value
It is imperative to create distinct value for every party in the SNI partnerships. A project that is not central to the mission or existing work of an organization will often fall to the wayside, leaving students and faculty with an unsatisfactory experience and partners disappointed with the relationship. ISS needs to ensure that projects chosen as SNI collaborations clearly fulfill both partner and faculty priorities.
ISS has designed and implemented a new and exciting platform for community-university engagement at PSU that helps empower local neighborhood organizations in advancing their sustainability goals. The Sustainable Neighborhood Initiative builds upon and honors PSU’s already strong reputation for excellence in community engagement and the region’s strength in sustainability. This report demonstrates the positive impact that the SNI is having in our communities and the benefit it provides to the University.

As ISS moves forward into the second full year of the Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative there are a few objectives to keep in mind. The following strategies will continue to advance the SNI and address some of the complex partnership challenges listed previously listed:

- Focus on specific priority areas for each of our partnerships, while building sustainable relationships that assess the needs of each specific organization. This will mean more targeted projects and research opportunities, and perhaps a smaller number of overall course collaborations.
- Expand and fine-tune the Fellows program, which has proven to be a valuable resource for our partners and is a significant opportunity for our students to deepen their learning and expand their professional skills.
- Prioritize projects that can span multiple terms, courses, or departments, and lead to more effective and impactful signature projects.
- Create more opportunities to place interns within partner organizations. ISS intends to place 10 interns in the upcoming year to help foster new partner relationships between the community and University, while giving more PSU students a valuable learning opportunity.
- Explore additional ways to create community-university partnerships that offer increased opportunities to engage students in neighborhood-scale sustainability work.

We are excited to incorporate these lessons and goals into our strategic planning to grow and improve the Sustainable Neighborhoods Initiative for the 2015-16 academic year.