

## **Sustainable Community Development Education in the Finger Lakes**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the creation and successes to date of an undergraduate minor program in Sustainable Community Development at Hobart & William Smith Colleges (HWS) in Geneva, New York. As a case study, it describes the program that HWS faculty created, the various components that comprise the undergraduate minor, some reasons why faculty chose to create a program based on sustainable community development rather than “sustainability studies,” the projects on which the students have worked, and some reasons for the success of the program. This program can be used by other colleges and universities as an alternative to programs that focus on sustainability studies only.

**Keywords:** sustainable community development, education, interdisciplinarity, collaboration, college and town relations

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However conceived, described, or analyzed, sustainability is *the* issue of our time, all others being subordinate to the global conversation now under way about whether, how, and under what terms the human experiment will continue. David W. Orr

In 2011, Hobart & William Smith Colleges (HWS), a private liberal arts college in the Finger Lakes wine region of Upstate New York with 2,300 students, was approached by a recent graduate about the possibility of funding the creation of a program in real estate development. (At HWS, technically two small liberal arts colleges, men attend Hobart and women attend William Smith.) A generous philanthropist and thriving real estate developer, the alumnus felt that he had benefited from his time spent learning from faculty in the Colleges' programs in Architectural Studies and Urban Studies. He had already funded the renovation of a design studio for the Colleges' successful Architectural Studies program.<sup>1</sup> Campus administrators responded by stating that HWS did not have the faculty nor resources to create such a program and pitched a new idea: creating an interdisciplinary minor program in Sustainable Community Development (SCD). The program would be housed within the Environmental Studies Program, which, depending on the year, is the largest on campus major (and nearly always the largest interdisciplinary minor). Representatives from other programs and departments, such as Architectural Studies, Economics, Biology, and the Finger Lakes Institute (FLI, an on-campus office dedicated to promoting environmental research and education about the Finger Lakes region), rounded out the planning committee. In response, the alumnus, through his relationship with the not-for-profit Isabel Foundation in Flint, Michigan, granted HWS \$100,000 to pilot the initiative. HWS received two additional years of funding, which came to an end in the Summer of 2014, to launch the program.

This case study describes the program that HWS faculty created, the various components that comprise the undergraduate minor, some reasons why faculty chose to create a program based on sustainable community development rather than "sustainability studies," the projects on which the students have worked, and some reasons for the success of the program, as well as some successes to date.

The alumnus initially asked HWS faculty and staff to look at the University of Michigan's real estate development certificate program as a model.<sup>2</sup> "We tried to develop an HWS version of some of the same skill sets while acknowledging that we are a liberal arts college," according to FLI Director Lisa Cleckner.<sup>3</sup> Based on the available HWS course offerings and beliefs among the committee members about skill sets that students should master by completing the minor, students are required to complete six courses, including a required introductory course (ENV 101) titled "Sustainable Communities" and an intense, cross-listed "capstone" course (ARCH/ENV 351), usually completed in a student's third or final year of study, titled "Sustainable Community Development Methods." Students select one technical writing course (e.g., "The Science Beat"); one methods course (e.g., statistics, GIS, film editing, or design studio); one service learning course; and one elective course from a list of pre-approved courses in the humanities, social sciences, or sciences to round out the minor.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of a student's declared major or minor, we have already seen a number of students who come to the SCD program having completed at least three of the six courses.

The “bookends” of this program, courses ENV 101 and ARCH/ENV 351, are keys to its success. By the end of the first three Spring semesters during which ENV 101 was offered to six class sections total (2012-2014), the number of students totaled more than 200. By the end of the 2014-2015 school year, that number reached more than 265 students. ENV 101 is an extremely popular class. Although students come to this class with a fair amount of knowledge about environmental topics, they have limited knowledge of sustainability. The course begins with an interrogation of the 3 Es of sustainability: environmental protection, economic development, and social equity.<sup>5</sup> Students take to heart several important points from the Brundtland Commission’s 1987 report, that sustainable community development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” According to the Brundtland report, “It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of ‘needs,’ in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and the future needs.”<sup>6</sup>

As a survey course, ENV 101 introduces students to the concept of sustainable community development as applied to real world communities. The course not only focuses on the United Nation’s three “interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars” of sustainable development but also on intertwined subjects such as agriculture, architecture, biology, culture, ecology, education, historic preservation, landscape design, public policy, and urban planning, to name a few. Rochester, Geneva, and local communities in the Finger Lakes area serve as case studies to discern how cities and towns are working to become more sustainable. Students learn about opportunities to become civically engaged and involved within those communities.<sup>7</sup>

Guest speakers play an important role in ENV 101, both in the classroom and as part of four or five required evening presentations and lectures by recognized leaders in sustainable community development. Various architects, city planners, community activists, engineers, farmers, and neighborhood leaders offer their time for the Sustainable Community Development Spring Lecture Series.<sup>8</sup> The lecture series, which is open to the general public, touches on the key themes of the course: sustainability concepts generally; the built environment (including historic preservation and transportation); energy and waste; food and water; science, business, and technology; and “healthy communities.” Through their interactions with guest speakers, students are able to investigate and better understand renewable energy, what makes certain neighborhoods successful, green cities and infrastructure, the value of nature, biomimicry, LEED rating standards, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), and the High Line in New York City, among many other topics.<sup>9</sup>

Students in this course spend the entire semester working in groups on a larger project. Several of the projects have focused on the following places: the Seneca Army Depot, which once provided the most munitions for the U.S. during World War II all the way until the first Gulf War; the separation, differences, and possible overlap of services between the Town and City of Geneva; neighborhood issues and development; urban water quality concerns and stormwater runoff mitigation, especially regarding Castle Creek, which runs through Geneva; the future of tourism in the Finger Lakes; and the nexus of water and energy in the Finger Lakes.<sup>10</sup>

The work of one group of students is noteworthy. In the Spring of 2013, one group selected as its project the proposed demolition of Finger Lakes Community College's (FLCC) satellite campus in Geneva, which is located in the old Geneva High School. FLCC planned to demolish the school in order to make way for a new, smaller building at the same location. The students in ENV 101 spoke to the architect of the new school, conducted research in the local archives, located newspaper articles about the old building, interviewed neighbors, and reached out to City Council leaders. They then used their respective knowledge and skills in sustainability, design and architecture, environmental consciousness, and social media to produce an informative video project.<sup>11</sup> Although the building was eventually demolished, these students felt that they had participated in community discussions about this place and taken informed action. They showed through their efforts that—to borrow a phrase from a National Trust for Historic Preservation campaign—“This Place Matters.”

After the introductory course was up-and-running, ARCH/ENV 351 “Sustainable Community Development Methods” was created.<sup>12</sup> By the time students enroll in the capstone course, it is anticipated that they will not only have a firm grounding in sustainable community development but also have learned several skills and tools that can be brought to bear on their final project. In its first semester, this co-taught seminar focused on downtown Geneva, looking at what to do with several parcels of vacant land and underutilized spaces.<sup>13</sup> In its second semester, this course had as its project the development of a Brownfield into a park in the East Lakeview Neighborhood. Working in groups, students had countless brainstorming sessions, multi-stakeholder meetings, and charrettes within the community; they interviewed various residents and business owners, spent countless hours pursuing research within the community, and devised several plans to implement on this particular piece of land.<sup>14</sup> In the Spring of 2015, students worked and collaborated on two projects for the Town of Canandaigua: multi-modal transportation master planning and stormwater planning.<sup>15</sup> The students who have completed this course have helped strengthen the Colleges' connections to the local community, while gaining relevant skills by participating in real-world projects.

A number of on-campus initiatives led to the selection of a path in SCD rather than simply “sustainability studies.” The Environmental Studies (ES) and Architectural Studies (AS) programs at HWS have experienced exponential growth within the last few years and, as a result, student enrollment in these programs is at an all-time high. Students are being exposed to the ways in which myriad environmental challenges and the built environment go hand-in-hand, and have learned the value of interdisciplinary work. HWS students also have seen a rise in the number of employment opportunities within urban planning, sustainability-related careers, and the environmental not-for-profits, as well as unique and new graduate programs globally. As a result, the ES program has witnessed a 55 percent increase in declared majors and minors, while the AS program has seen an increase by 50 percent in declared majors. Indeed, the program in SCD not only is a differentiator that allows HWS to set itself apart from other colleges but also allows HWS to build on unique and existing strengths that few other liberal arts colleges have.<sup>16</sup>

The decision to create this program was intentional: “by 2011, many colleges and universities were launching or had recently established sustainability majors and minors, and we thought integrating a community development focus would help to distinguish an HWS program from the others,” according to Cleckner. “The ‘real-world’ skills were something that the granter

emphasized and we wanted to make sure that the program would appeal to students from [various] disciplines.” And since a focus area of FLI is economic development and its staff “recognize[s] the value and impact of higher ed[ucation] institutions on communities,” Cleckner and other faculty felt that “sustainable community development is a form of economic development for our community and our region.” Such deliberate decisions to be good stewards within the community and of local resources go hand-in-hand with projects elsewhere on campus, in the nearby Town and City of Geneva, and in the larger Finger Lakes region of Upstate New York.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, HWS is committed to working with community leaders and citizens within the small, 13,000-person city of Geneva, New York, to establish ways in which both the Colleges and the city can collaborate and grow in mutually beneficial ways. HWS recently launched the Geneva Initiative, a plan to commit \$2 million dollars over ten years to the municipality. Such efforts go hand-in-hand with HWS’s longstanding service learning initiatives in which students on campus perform a variety of tasks, volunteer at several local not-for-profits, and generally act in ways that provide examples of serious citizenship and public ethics.

The Colleges were also committed to several sustainability efforts that predate the grant funding. Like several other colleges and universities, HWS became a charter signatory to the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment. Foremost among the commitments was the announcement in 2011 that the Colleges would purchase 100 percent of its electricity from wind power, as well as the establishment of an Office of Sustainability, the strong support of the student Eco-Reps Program, the construction of electric vehicle (EV) charging stations, and high levels of student interest in environmental studies topics generally.<sup>18</sup> The Colleges recently acquired a farm and students have played a large role in the planning for the property. It is anticipated that the farm will be devoted to sustainable agriculture, while some portion of the land will include the installation of a solar array.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there are a number of exciting on-campus initiatives, as well as campus-community programs, that made easy the decision to adopt a program in sustainable community development.<sup>20</sup>

After receiving the initial funding, HWS and FLI hired a Program Manager to establish a committee of faculty and staff to plan for the program, to facilitate its planning, and to work with faculty to create the entry-level survey course. The Program Manager arranged for guest lecturers for that class, networked with local businesses, governmental, and not-for-profit organizations, and brought dozens of people to campus, including environmental educator David Orr, architect and urban planner Doug Farr, and journalist and NPR radio host Steve Curwood.<sup>21</sup> To make this project successful, it was crucial to have dedicated staff.

The CSD Program soon added a Community Design Center (CDC), which became the Finger Lakes Community Development Center.<sup>22</sup> The Center provides paid Summer internships to undergraduate students. In its initial Summer, the CDC worked on two projects: first, working within Ontario County to design green infrastructure elements and, second, assessing the needs of a main entrance into both the Town and City of Geneva.<sup>23</sup> In its second summer, the CDC staff and students worked on the City of Geneva Parks Master Plan.<sup>24</sup> One early “client” was Ontario ARC, which determined that it wanted to construct an outdoor recreation area at its Eberhardt Center in nearby Canandaigua. The design center’s director and a group of paid

student interns developed sensory gardens and new paths and structures, in an effort to enrich the place, make it useful to the 70 adult residents, and improve their quality of life. The students had to determine what was non-poisonous, low maintenance, and sustainable in terms of plant selection. What is exciting about this example is that the Ontario ARC has already started to build the selected design. Indeed, these were real-world experiences for students that had positive real-world consequences.<sup>25</sup>

The SCD minor was approved by HWS faculty in Spring 2014 and has already proven successful. Just a few weeks after approval, the program graduated its first four seniors with the minor, several of whom have jobs “in the field.”<sup>26</sup> Seven students earned the minor in 2015 and at least 13 students will graduate with the SCD minor in 2016.<sup>27</sup> More than 20 additional students are currently declared and 22 out of 62 students in the “Sustainable Communities” course during the Spring 2014 semester expressed a strong interest in pursuing the minor. Lastly, in part because of the success of the SCD program, the Environmental Studies faculty in Fall 2014 launched a new live-learn community for first-year students that is dedicated to sustainable living.<sup>28</sup> These are not boastful observations. Rather there exists the hope that the work that has been pursued and the steps that have been taken will act as a model for other schools.

The SCD Program has also had additional successes. The two faculty members who taught the capstone course were recently recognized by the Geneva Neighborhood Resource Center with a “Quality, Research, and Design” award for their work with students on the East Lakeview Neighborhood park.<sup>29</sup> The establishment of this program has made it possible to hire two new faculty members in Environmental Studies, as well additional staff. The SCD Program has also helped and will continue to strengthen “town and gown” relations. Part of what has also helped this program is the creation of a regular blog series as part of the Finger Lakes Institute’s monthly newsletter, *Happenings*, with the tag line, “SCD Concepts.”<sup>30</sup> HWS is already starting to see that, along with other programs, SCD acts as a recruitment tool for undergraduates. Furthermore, students from various programs across the HWS campus are realizing that there are a multitude of benefits to completing this minor.

As a result of taking SCD courses or completing the SCD program, a great amount of what the students are exposed to is the benefits of interdisciplinarity.<sup>31</sup> Oftentimes academics can become fixed within specific disciplines and silos of study. Studying sustainable communities, however, gets students away from “fixed” thinking and enables them to see the benefits of learning across a broad range of disciplines. Each semester students in the SCD program learn from, among other people, architects, engineers, business owners, economists, experts in advertising and other fields, historic preservationists, and community members. The students see how it is important to have an understanding of what makes a good building or neighborhood or community or project and that most often it is because of successes on multiple levels—at the level of the individual, as a result of the built environment, or in response to various social, cultural, environmental, and economic forces. No one “thing” by itself makes a community successful. Most importantly, through the projects that students have completed in ENV 101, ARCH/ENV 351, and during internships through the Community Development Center, students are engaged and doing something to help create a more livable present and future.

The Sustainable Community Development minor program at Hobart & William Smith Colleges, because it utilizes existing resources and is also perhaps more appealing to a greater number of students than the amorphous “sustainability studies,” is model that other academic institutions might wish to emulate. In creating this dynamic and innovative program, the faculty and staff at HWS stand behind the words of Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation (Haudenosaunee-Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy), who once stated, “Even though you and I are in different boats, you in your boat and we in our canoe, we share the same River of Life. What befalls me, befalls you. And downstream, downstream in this River of Life, our children will pay for our selfishness, for our greed, and for our lack of vision.”<sup>32</sup> Sustainability concepts must be connected and infused throughout our entire education system. We sincerely hope that HWS’s program in Sustainable Community Development and other programs that it influences will help start the discussion and movements toward informed action, and that our efforts will be replicated and improved upon, spurring on a legion of informed activists bent on making this world a safer, healthier, and more sustainable place.<sup>33</sup>

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